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Future Publishing Australia, PO Box 1077 Mount Street, North Sydney, NSW 2059
Tel: (02) 9955 2677 **Fax:** (02) 9955 2688
Web: www.futureplc.com
Subscription enquiries: Please call CRM: (02) 8227 6486

Editorial
EDITOR **David Hollingworth**
david.hollingworth@futurenet.com
CREATIVE DIRECTOR **Troy Coleman**
troy.coleman@futurenet.com

Contributors
Meghann O'Neill, Theo, Chris Szewczyk,

Photography
All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Advertising
Group Advertising Manager: **Cameron Ferris**
cameron.ferris@futurenet.com

Management
Managing Director: **Neville Daniels**
Sales Director: **Paul Marttila**

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WHERE ANGELS FEAR...

PC PowerPlay rushes in. Wait...

It's been one of those months where I really wish I wasn't such a basic bish when it game to the games I play. There's two MASSIVE games reviewed in this issue that I am almost literally in awe of, that I really, truly want to play and enjoy, and then join in the discourse of all the people I know who love them...

But instead I'm comfort-playing through Ghost Recon: Wildlands again.

I wish I was the kind of person who liked flight sims, because Microsoft Flight Sim 2020 is garnering rave reviews, and my social feeds are full of people sharing their flight paths and adventures, not to mention flying around the now legendary Melbourne Monolith. I want to be there, but... My tolerance for flying games ends at Chuck Yeager's Air Combat.

Similarly, I'm amazed at the epic stories of intrigue and betrayal being played out in numerous games of Crusader Kings 3, but every time I try to get into the CK games, my eyes kinda glaze over. Friends tell me constantly that "If you like Total War, you will LOVE, Crusader Kings." But I'm just not that clever, basically. Though I do hear that CK3 has improved the tutorial process, so who knows?

Shit, I think I just talked myself into buying it...

David Hollingworth

My tolerance for flying games ends at Chuck Yeager's Air Combat.

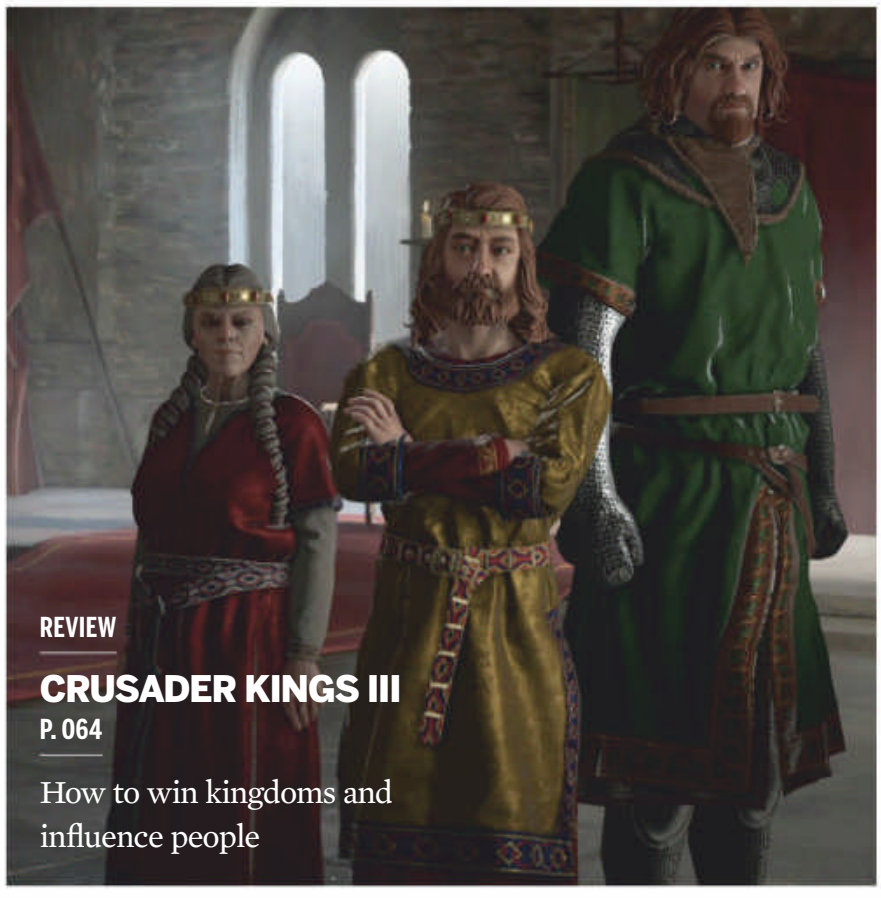
ON THE COVER

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: SHADOWLANDS

P. 052

No decision in World of Warcraft matters more than your race and class. Every character, from hardcore raiders to that level 14 undead warlock you started six years ago on a whim but never touched again, is defined by these two traits. And few of the choices you make in the countless hours that unfold after starting a new adventure are ever as meaningful. World of Warcraft: Shadowlands is going to change that.

THE TOP 100
THE BEST GAMES TO PLAY RIGHT NOW
P. 020
Welcome to the official and definitive PCPowerPlay Top 100 list for 2020



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BIRDING BOARD GAME WINGSPAN COMES TO STEAM

A great board game is now a great port.

Wingspan is one of the best board games of the past decade, and now it has a digital version. Just released on Steam, Wingspan's new digital edition is a pretty impressive bit of work for a port between physical and digital. In Wingspan, players build out clever combinations of birds—all of which have unique powers — to make their collection of birds more valuable and effective than their competitors. The digital version has everything you'd want for that purpose: Birds, bird noises, forest noises, and gorgeous illustrations of birds — some of which are even animated in this version.

Plus, you can click on your birds while you wait for your turn and they make adorable chirps. It's relaxing to play.

Released in 2019 on tabletop, Elizabeth Hargrave's Wingspan has rapidly become an all-time frontrunner in strategy card games. It's what's called an "engine-building" game. You can take a selection of actions on any given turn, and over time you play cards to empower those actions and make turns more efficient. Wingspan's easily-understood yet deep strategy has made it a favorite game across a wide variety of players.

Cyberpunk 2077 system requirements revealed

CD Projekt unveiled the required specs during today's online presentation last month.

With Cyberpunk 2077 now just a couple of months away, CD Projekt revealed the PC system requirements during a Night City Wire online presentation.

Minimum:
OS: Windows 7 or 10, 64-bit
Processor: Intel Core i5-3570K or AMD FX-8310
Memory: 8GB RAM
Graphics: Nvidia GeForce GTX 780 3GB or AMD Radeon RX 470
DirectX: Version 12
Storage: 70 GB HDD, SSD recommended

Recommended
OS: Windows 10, 64-bit
Processor: Intel Core i7-4790 or AMD Ryzen 3 3200G
Memory: 12GB RAM
Graphics: Nvidia GeForce GTX 1060 6GB or AMD Radeon R9 Fury
DirectX: Version 12
Storage: 70 GB SSD

Not too bad as these things go—even the recommended spec isn't too heavy, although 70GB on an SSD is a pretty beefy chunk. But a Core i7-4790 and 1060 GTX is pretty manageable, I'd say.

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AFTER BANNING WECHAT, THE US GOVERNMENT IS TURNING ITS FOCUS TO TENCENT'S GAMING CONCERNS

A new report claims the Trump administration is making inquiries with Epic Games and Riot Games.

When US President Donald Trump issued an executive order banning the Tencent-owned WeChat app back in August, there was speculation that the Chinese conglomerate's voluminous gaming portfolio might also come under scrutiny. Tencent owns Riot Games and holds a 40 percent stake in Epic Games — its fingers are in dozens of other pies as well.

Bloomberg reports that the scrutiny has commenced: the Committee on Foreign Investment in the US has reportedly written to companies including Riot Games and Epic Games on the topic of their handling of personal data security.

The motive is likely the same one that prompted executive orders banning WeChat and TikTok. In these orders, Trump claimed the apps shared the personal data of Americans, and Chinese citizens in the US, with the Chinese Communist Party.

I'm not worthy of the absolute power of this transforming scorpion cockpit

"Desk" just doesn't do it justice.

The Cluvens scorpion "cockpit" is a motorized desk, transforming from a 'relaxed' incline to an upright desk. The keyboard tray slides into place in front of your lap (trapping you, incidentally). The arm, which can hold up to three 29" monitors (or a 49" ultrawide), folds down in front of you, enveloping your entire field of view. Cluvens announced this chair in September, but I honestly can't believe it hasn't somehow appeared in a movie about evil hackers already.

You can easily picture this thing in a fight. It's practically a Droideka already. It'd just break off its monitor arm at the tip and use the jagged metal and exposed cables as a stinger. The legs already move as it transforms, a horrifying image if you have an insect phobia or carpeted floors. We've seen similar designs to this transforming desk, but none of them had scorpion feet, which really changes the vibe of the whole thing.

Cluvens knows the image it's projecting here, and the absurdity of its creation. Its website offers the assurance that "the Scorpion's claws look a little sharp, but they actually have rounded corners. So you don't have to worry about getting cut by the corners."

The Scorpion is made of "industrial grade carbon steel" and its electronics are covered by a two year warranty. It supports a weight of up to 124 kg, which is just slightly more than it weighs, itself. It costs US$3,299 and comes in only one color: Black. And yes, of course, it has built-in color LEDs. This is the one true battlestation. Someone needs to play Crysis on it, stat.

Corsair's introductory stock price values the company at up to $1.65 billion

Gaming has been good to Corsair.

Corsair reckons it is worth in the neighborhood of $1.65 billion, based on the numbers attached to its initial public offering (IPO). As part of that, it intends to sell 14 million shares at US$16 to US$18 a pop, which works out to US$224 million to US$252 million. That includes 7.5 million shares sold by Corsair, and 6.5 million shares from selling stockholders. So where does the US$1.65 billion valuation come from? According to Market Watch, the company will end up with 91,849,366 shares outstanding, which in stock trading parlance includes shares sold to the public and those earmarked for the company's employees.

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GE Raider SERIES

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GL Leopard SERIES

GS Stealth SERIES

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

It's not all about the B-movies. There are good ones in this collection, too!

TWITCH PLAYS VHS

Streamer **FORGOTTEN_VCR** turns '80s found footage into mixtapes.

Ninjas, Japan's historical hitmen, were originally meant to be stealthy assassins, striking in the night and then disappearing into the shadows. I'm not sure what changed between 12th century Japan and 1980s Hong Kong, but by the time cult movie director Godfrey Ho was through with ninjas, they were white guys wearing bright red and yellow Halloween costumes, racing to the top of mountains and bellowing "NINJAAAA" into the sky. That's one of many bizarre, hilarious scenes that pops up again and again like a meme in the mixtapes of Forgotten_VCR, a Twitch channel that mostly eschews videogames in favour of pulp cinema streamed from actual VHS tapes three nights a week.

The Forgotten_VCR Twitch channel started as a convenient way for the streamer, who has asked me to refer to him with the simple nickname 'VCR', to watch video tapes at his desk – he's currently a university professor by day – without hauling the hardware into his office. "I thought it sounded like a *Metal Gear*-y name for what I was doing," he says. "I did that for a couple months and then people started tuning in."

VCR tested the waters with a compilation of toy commercials he'd play on Saturday mornings, and then in mid-2019, he started making mixtapes, cutting together absurd scenes from infamously bad ninja movies, '80s tech commercials, wrestling, super sentai, and other oddities lurking in his tape collection. A year later he's made more than 50, and 200-300 viewers will tune in on a Sunday night eager to see a new tape played live.

"It's kind of a gimmick, if I'm going to be totally honest," he says. "But here's the thing: if it's a video file in Adobe Premiere, why are you tuning into me? Why aren't I just posting this on YouTube? When I have this VCR and you hear it and see the little icon that says 'play' and 'stop' and all that, it immediately makes it feel like 'I have to be here. This is on a tape'. It's part of the look of the stream."

ON THE RECORD

That real hardware is an essential part of Forgotten_VCR's retro, underground vibe. But it's also a key part of why and how he makes these mixtapes to begin with, which he also did in college in the early 2000s.

"The one that I always tell people that I saw way before YouTube was Winnebago Man. That ended pretty much every compilation tape we'd get at the university I attended," he explains. "There were a few video artists like Derrick Beckles who made this whole series called TV Carnage, where he would juxtapose footage to try to tell a story and completely pervert things. I remember

Press REC

Forgotten_VCR's Patreon grants access to a Discord where fans do something rare in the insular found footage hobby: share. "People can be really guarded and protective. I think that's stupid, because we don't own any of this stuff," he says. He gives a list of movies in each mix to superstar mod The_Outsider, who maintains a master spreadsheet with links to YouTube or Archive.org.

LEFT: '90s action star Cynthia Rothrock has recently become a popular character on the stream.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE *The recurring stars of the Forgotten_VCR mixtapeverse*

MARY
She looks innocent, but evolving lore suggests Mary may be secretly evil. Probably because of her hair.

HANUMAN
Deity turned building-sized super sentai warrior. You can catch him palling around with Kamen Rider.

HARRY
Actor Richard Harrison famously starred in many of Godfrey Ho's ultra low budget ninja movies.

NINJAS
You can always tell they're ninjas because their headbands rather handily say 'Ninja' on them.

finding that really appealing. He wasn't just putting things together in a compilation. He was trying to subvert what you were expecting."

When he got the idea to start making tapes for Twitch, VCR went out and bought a couple Panasonic tape decks and a mixer, nearly the same setup he had in college. He does video editing in Premiere as a side job to teaching, but working on tape forces him to keep things simple instead of editing over cuts. He'll put movies on while he works, and when something catches his attention – usually a fight scene – he'll rewind, slap a post-it note on it, and add it to the pile for a potential mixtape.

As he's gained a devoted following, the tapes have grown increasingly elaborate. His fans are building lore around actors who pop up in multiple movies, turning them into characters with imagined motivations and backstories. "That encourages me to look for footage that matches this story that they've made up," he says. "I've managed to take a centuries-old Indian god named Hanuman and turned him into the weirdest meme of my channel. He's this ape human, and there are all these stories of him saving the Indian people and being this hero. I purposefully edited footage of him just doing horrendous violence to people and now everyone in my chat is scared of Hanuman and talks about how disgusting and violent he is and how he'll just murder you. There are plenty of clips of Hanuman playing with children and patting them on the head and being very nice. But I've never shown any of that footage, because everyone's created this lore of Hanuman being this horrible person."

AS HE'S GAINED A FOLLOWING, THE TAPES HAVE GROWN INCREASINGLY ELABORATE.

Even 50 mixtapes in, VCR has barely made a dent in his library. He started collecting in high school, where his local comic shop sold bootleg anime and the Korean deli next door also happened to rent out tapes – primarily Asian movies, dubbed into English, with Chinese subtitles. "Eventually VHS just became uncool, and it was really easy to acquire them," he says. "You just tell people that you collect tapes and they'll just hand them to you."

The money from Twitch streaming has allowed him to hunt for obscure movies on Yahoo! Auctions to add more scenes with stars his audience adores, like martial artist Cynthia Rothrock, and stuff they'd otherwise never know about, like movies from Thailand and Malaysia. It's also proven to be a surprising source for new side gigs – because of Forgotten_VCR, he's started cutting music videos for vaporwave musicians.

"I have two kids, a mortgage, college debt and all that, so I had to take video gigs I didn't really want to take to make money," he says. "Now the money I make from the stream has replaced a lot of the bullshit I don't want to do. So I always tell my audience one of the best things they gave me was the ability to say 'no' to things that I don't feel like are very creatively stimulating. Why would I take that money for that job when I could do something that I really, really love?" ■

Wes Fenlon

(I'm face-to-face with a bright-eyed golden labrador, holding the last sheet of paper softly in his mouth. He nudges toward me slightly, offering the document.)

THE WRONG TREE

When you expect adopting a puppy to be a path to love, rather than poop.

I think Best Friend Forever is supposed to be cute. Dating, having a dog... what could possibly be unappealing about that? Well, my in-game dog has already pooped and tried to run away (in an idle window) while I've been typing and we're only three sentences into this column. I'm using a dating app on which I can't match with a single other person who doesn't also have a ridiculous pet. This experience is making me glad I'm not single. And it's making me resent my actual dog and his never-ending needs, which are interrupting my caring for this virtual dog!

OK, fine, the game is cute, but definitely in a grudging kind of a way. It's like getting up at 6am to let your annoying labrador out for a wee, but he's so happy to see you, you end up playing fetch for an hour instead of going back to bed. At one point, I had to mash the left mouse button to pat Cardigan (my ever cowering, in-game dog) while I was trying to have a first kiss with a cute guy. The timing was coincidental, but suspicious. My real-life dog, Ghost, does not like it when I kiss my husband, in preference to getting a pat, either.

So yes, I'm describing time-sensitive minigames that aim to keep you engaged with your furry pal. Click to pat, drag to dispose of poop, pull your dog away from jumping on others, and so on. Failure results in decreased doggy mood, which needs to be addressed at the end of each week, by shaking biscuits, waving a hose and all manner of (authentically) aggravating tasks. I did enjoy the minigames, though, especially when they collided comically with the narrative, like when I "accidentally" didn't prevent Cardigan from pooping in the art gallery.

The writing is cheerful, enthusiastic and occasionally brilliant. Comedy seems mostly reserved for when you pick (obviously silly) third options, like deciding to interpret the vet's invitation onto the examination bench as being for yourself, rather than your dog. Amazingly, and I'm not sure I mean this positively, much of the innuendo (you'd expect from a dating sim) is dog-related. There's a scantily-clad figure skater who is really into bully sticks. For her dog. I hope. What's a bully stick? Something I don't ever want to witness Ghost tearing into ...

One of my favourite moments was when the guy with the service labrador (he's either blind or with low vision) asked me if I trusted Cardigan. Cardigan, maybe, but I chose to answer, "Not if there's food involved," thinking about Ghost, who is mostly definitely NOT a service labrador. Oddly, although this game 'gets' dogs on some very deep levels, there are occasional, incongruous moments.

Also, given I went on a date to a fancy restaurant, with my dog (and after what happened at the art gallery), leaving one's pet outside of anywhere seems unnecessary. In fact, I was surprised to find myself judging dates on how they treated their pet, which adds an interesting layer to the narrative. One person even said they thought their dog was cuter than mine. That's astonishingly unattractive.

I finished the game not being sure if I'd actually romanced anyone. And, there were a couple of loose threads I was wondering if I could have investigated further. It's quite replayable, given that vignettes are chosen, week to week, and you can't see everything on a first try. Not surprisingly, given how naughty Ghost is, not to mention my previous dog, a wild border collie named Bob, Cardigan came dead last out of all the game's pets, in every aspect of training. I imagine, if you want better results, you actually have to pay proper attention to poop.

The most annoying thing about Best Friend Forever is that I can no longer traipse around the block with Ghost and remain oblivious to how many random blokes I say 'hello' to on a daily basis. Maybe they all want to date me. That's a terrifying thought. The most recent text I have on my phone is from a friend whose labrador (mortifyingly) jumped on a woman at the dog park and popped her puffer jacket. Can love really bloom, among the strewn stuffing of a stranger's puffer jacket? May depend on how cute your puppy is, after the fact.

Meghann O'Neill once picked up Ghost's poop in her bare hands. He'd pooped in the sea and it was floating towards some blissfully oblivious children. She probably deserves some kind of medal (the last time Meghann wrote a bio like this she forgot, and blamed me for it - Ed).

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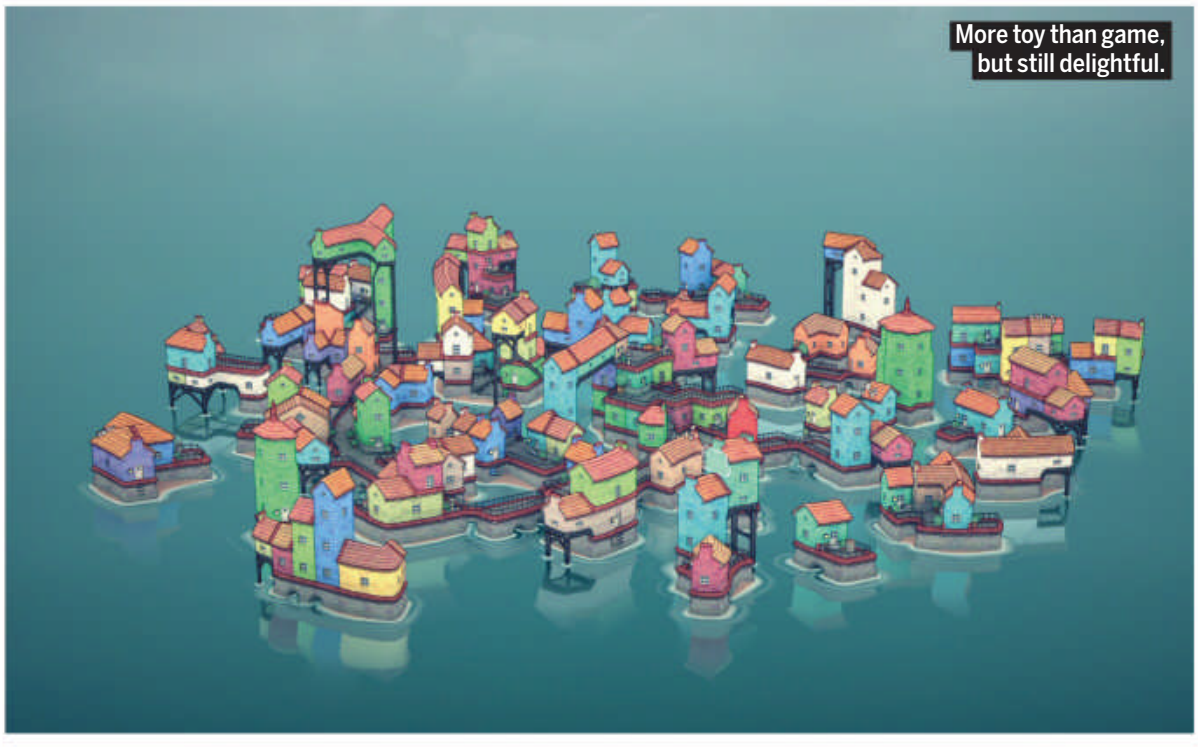
DRIVE YOUR GAME

A COLLECTION ASIDE

Like everyone, MEGHANN O'NEILL has been at home a lot recently, avoiding pandemics.

It's all stories and systems for MEGHANN O'NEILL this month, but in one game or the other, not both at the same time. Except, of course, that systems can often inspire the stories you will tell in your imagination, as you play, and that stories can be structured in systemic ways, too. Video games; we love them because they combine things, like a town made from many colours, or a collection of murderous food. Just decide which special drink you'd like to order after you die now. It won't be your last. Until it is.



More toy than game, but still delightful.

TOWNSCAPER

DEVELOPER Oskar Stålberg **PRICE** $8.50 **AVAILABILITY** Early Access

WEBSITE https://store.steampowered.com/app/1291340/Townscaper/

Townscaper opened suddenly and spectacularly, like accidentally falling in love. The initial lack of familiarity meant that each investigation had a surprising outcome. I chose a colour, placed a piece and always ended up with something that was unexpectedly delightful; wonky dwellings on stilts, charming manor houses, rainbow coloured extensions, impossible bridges and complex structures I couldn't even name for you. I made a temple, by accident. There was no no expectation, up front, beyond the clumsy creation of something beautiful.

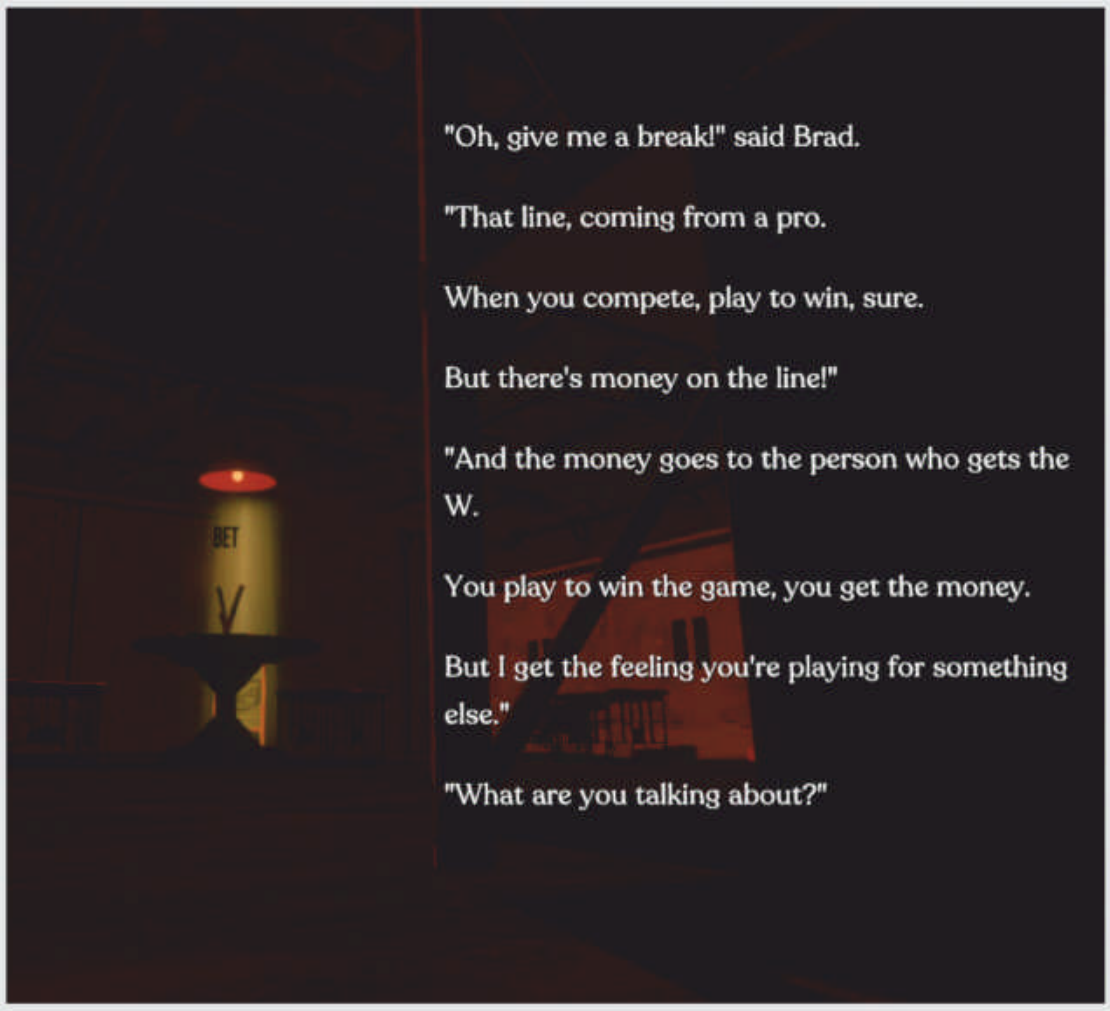
As with all great infatuations, the risk of alienation exists, but remains invisible, for a time. I became tempted to see if I could create a more ordered town; houses in a row, districts based on some imagined idea of wealth, power, beauty or otherwise. To a degree, the game yielded. I started on a castle which inclined (somewhat) towards how I'd envisioned it. I became frustrated by irregular, star-shaped tiles along its walls and my complete inability to organise a more imposing design. My castle's final iteration was a sort of halfhearted, pretty gaol.

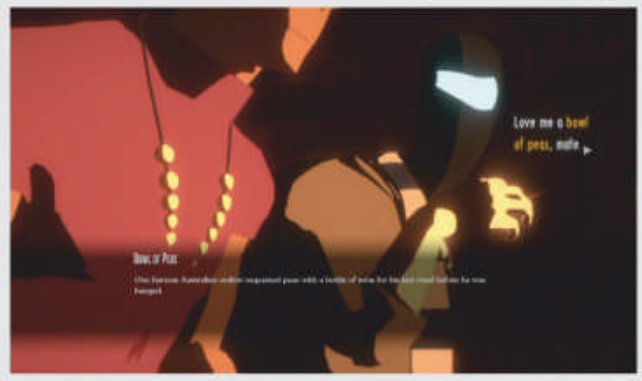
I stopped playing and started looking at the castles of other players on Reddit. They were impressive. It was immediately obvious how much time, planning and care had been invested into their creations, as well as how intimate an understanding of the grid would be required to achieve these results. I searched for imperfections, initially in an envious manner, and found mostly trees that didn't quite line up, or doors that weren't symmetrically distributed across a wall. A rare, awkward angle seemed precious to my eye.

I stopped playing and started looking at the castles of other players on Reddit. They were impressive.

I'm incredibly torn on whether Townscaper is the kind of love one aspires to, or the kind of love one accepts, in all of its messy splendour. So far, I haven't hit a hard boundary. There must be a limit for how high and how wide you can build, but (unlike my experience in almost every other game) curiosity feels disrespectful and counterproductive. When I arrive at Townscaper's edges, it will be organic, or accidental. This experience is probably both loves, but I strongly suspect that pushing would only result in an ugly town with hypothetically sad residents. I'm not sure I'm a patient person, by nature, but I am sure we are attracted to those with the qualities we desire to possess, or who bring out those qualities in us. I think I'll try to combine a more thoughtful approach to building beautiful castles with an appreciation for the unexpected, for a while longer. It probably doesn't need to be said that many wouldn't consider this "a game". Its developer refers to it as "a toy". But I suspect, after reading this far, you already know whether this is love or indifference, for you.

Townscaper is perfect. Except to mention the one aspect that may prevent me exploring it forever; it doesn't change over time. It's still in Early Access, so there may be scope to add aesthetic elements. You see, falling in love is great. But so is waking up one morning, noticing your long-term partner has a new patch of hair, somewhere weird. Perhaps I load my town and a sea wall has crumbled away, or vines have claimed the bottom of my lighthouse. Perhaps the old town needs a scrub, in a way that requires a more deliberate kind of affection.


"Oh, give me a break!" said Brad.
"That line, coming from a pro.
When you compete, play to win, sure.
But there's money on the line!"
"And the money goes to the person who gets the W.
You play to win the game, you get the money.
But I get the feeling you're playing for something else."
"What are you talking about?"
BET



You know, some philosophers believed that experiencing pain is one of the best ways to make sure you know you're alive.
Pessimism

NECROBARISTA

DEVELOPER Route 59 **PRICE** $24.95

AVAILABILITY Released **WEBSITE** https://www.necrobarista.com/

Right now, I'm 42 years old, and (likely) more than halfway through my life. I have a vivid memory of being (probably) 12, in the company of my grandmother and realising that, one day, death would be happening to me "now"; in the present moment, rather than in some abstract future. I was terrified. But I'm not terrified any more, I understand it. Grandma Winifred died at age 98, still healthy in every way, except that her heart stopped, as they eventually do. Necrobarista is about time, acceptance and the persistent echo of a once beating heart.

The Terminal is a coffee shop between here and wherever the unknowable "next place" may be. You'll spend 24 hours ordering drinks, chatting to people and trying not to scratch the nebulous itch that begins to appear as your precious last moments diminish. There's a luminescent tree, books lining wooden shelves and a strange girl with a robotic arm. Kishan arrives and is drawn into a last day that is both mundane and quite exceptional. He has choices to make but unlike in most visual novels, the story doesn't branch at all. He decides for himself.

This is not to say the player has no agency, although it is slight. You can select yellow, highlighted words from dialogue to gain additional perspectives and information. I found this prevented me from rushing and skim reading. At the end of each chapter, you can collect seven of the yellow keywords which then correspond to tokens, used to unlock memories (more text) in various arrangements. Figuring out which tokens you need should be motivating, but opportunities to spend them are sporadic.

Grandma Winifred died at age 98, still healthy in every way, except that her heart stopped, as they eventually do.

The game is (otherwise) literally just words and pictures, but it's hard to miss how beautifully each moment is framed. In the beginning, the wide angles were standoffish, as if everyone were in on some elaborate, private joke, except for me. As plot points were revealed, faces came closer and I came to understand how caring, if conflicted and complex, these people are. It's also worth noting how proudly the game wears Australia on its sleeve. Unapologetically Melbourne, too; it's definitely more proud of Ned Kelly than the rest of us are.

As with every aspect of presentation, the music is detailed and engaging. Created as a collaboration between Florence's Kevin Penkin and producer Jeremy Lim, it elegantly straddles a kind of implementation that lies between diegetic (as if it were on a radio in The Terminal) and soundtrack (where it is used to highlight dramatic moments). Again, it's sometimes alienating in the way jazz may be, sometimes warm, like elevator music, but the kind that makes you want to push the button of every floor you don't need to go to, just to hear more.

One of Necrobarista's more ancient characters remarks that customers used to ask which place they were in; heaven or hell, but that (now) no-one asks. On her last day, Grandma Winifred asked if she were in a church. She was from that era. I also recall placing my newborn son on her lap. Amazingly, the last time I recall mentioning my age in PC Powerplay, I'd just turned 30. But 42 is "happening now" and so will my last day. I only hope I can spend it in the company of baby grandchildren or, failing that, wordy baristas and bushrangers.

TELLING LIES

DEVELOPER Sam Barlow, Half Mermaid, Furious Bee Limited. **PRICE** $28.95

AVAILABILITY Released. **WEBSITE** https://store.steampowered.com/app/762830/Telling_Lies/

I've been teaching my tertiary students remotely for many months now. Am I sick of faces, talking at me, from a screen? I guess not. In Telling Lies, it helps that the characters are not asking me difficult questions. There are long silences, but they're contextual, not awkward. You're a ponytailed woman, her face gently reflected back as she works. Her eyes focus, then unfocus. You're viewing videos from an external hard drive that comprise one half of recorded conversations. You search these exchanges for words first guessed, then learned.

Yes, it's very similar to Her Story, also designed by Sam Barlow, but there are more characters and a plethora of secrets to uncover, rather than just a few. The first word, entered for you, is "love". You meet the central character discussing his one experience of love. You're taught to scrub backwards when his wife says, "Love you," and you realise it's the end of the clip. Almost immediately, I found myself searching for the other half of conversations. If your dad says, "Night night," what do you say in return? Then I found a cute, little girl.

Love is, indeed, a central theme in this game, sometimes heartwarming, frequently messy. What even is love? A long term commitment to someone? Those exciting first weeks together? Is it physical proximity? Security, authenticity, truthfulness? Control? Commitment to a cause? So many questions are raised. Although thirty-four conversations include the word, "love", you can only access the first five. Far more intriguing are the keywords that reveal six, meaning you need greater specificity to access that elusive sixth video.

I watched a man lie quietly on a bed for seven minutes and forty-seven seconds, wondering why he wasn't crying. I'd previously viewed the other half of this conversation. I couldn't understand his composure. I searched the brand name of a woman's sex toy, not entirely sure whether I wanted to find more. There's a video where everyone has to sit through the daughter's lengthy piano recital. She's about four (and by no means a prodigy). Adjacent moments are mundane, shocking, silly, regretful, or any other emotional tone you can imagine.

Although thirty-four conversations include the word, "love", you can only access the first five.

This experience's production values are intense. Although most conversations are intimate, some scenes include tens of actors, vehicles, complex sets, and so on. The acting is incredible, especially that of a cam girl who changes her persona to keep clients interested. Despite my playing "the sexy bits" when my kids were out of the room, one of them asked, "Mum, is that a student?" No, she is not. My students wear clothes. Honestly, though, the little girl was my favourite character, despite her piano playing. Bedtime stories were my favourite videos.

I was expecting to finish Telling Lies when I felt like I'd experienced enough of the story, but the game does end decisively (although it is possible to continue viewing videos). I had more than fifty carefully recorded keywords that I still wanted to search. If I have one criticism, it's that you have to scrub from the keyword and can't simply view videos from their beginning. But this is not a game for the impatient. If you're genuinely interested in finding all thirty-four times these people used the word, "love", pull a blanket over your head and settle in for a tale.

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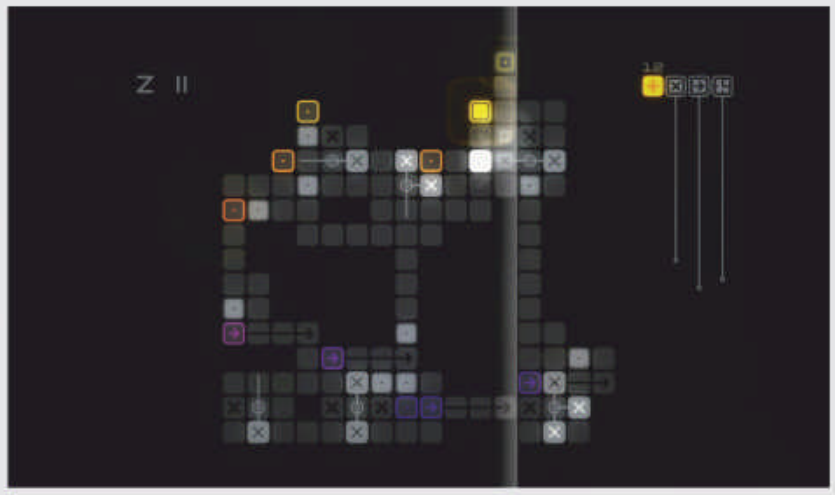
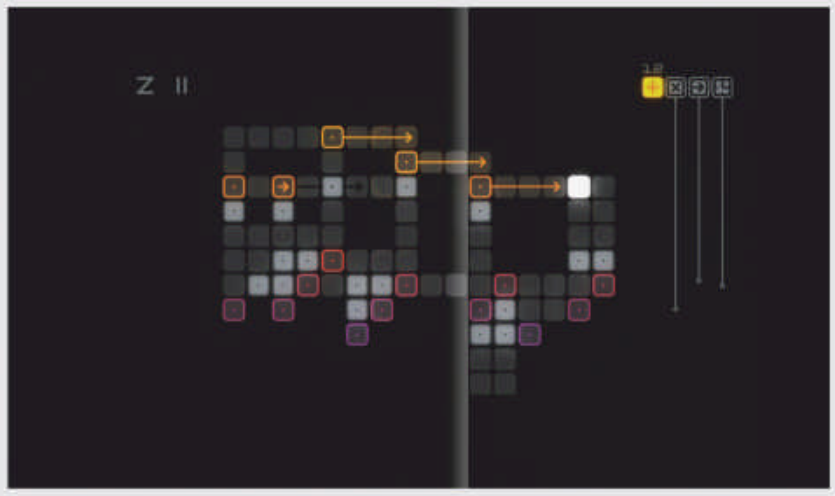




RESYNTH

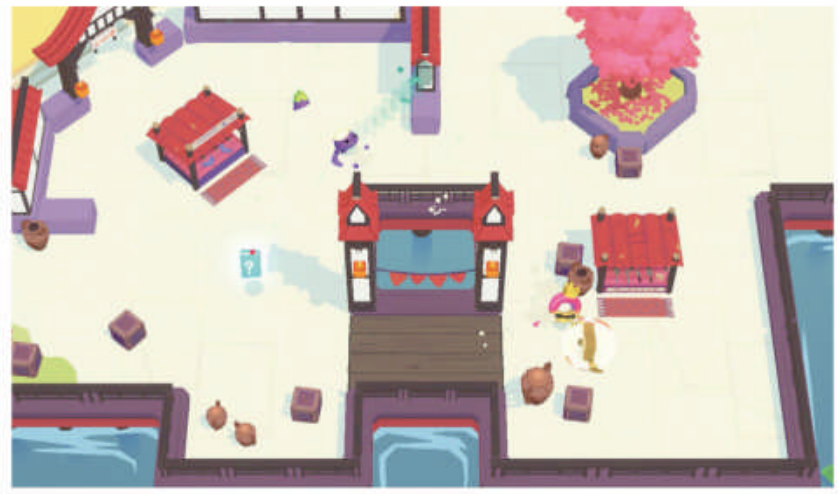
DEVELOPER Polyphonic LP **PRICE** $8.50

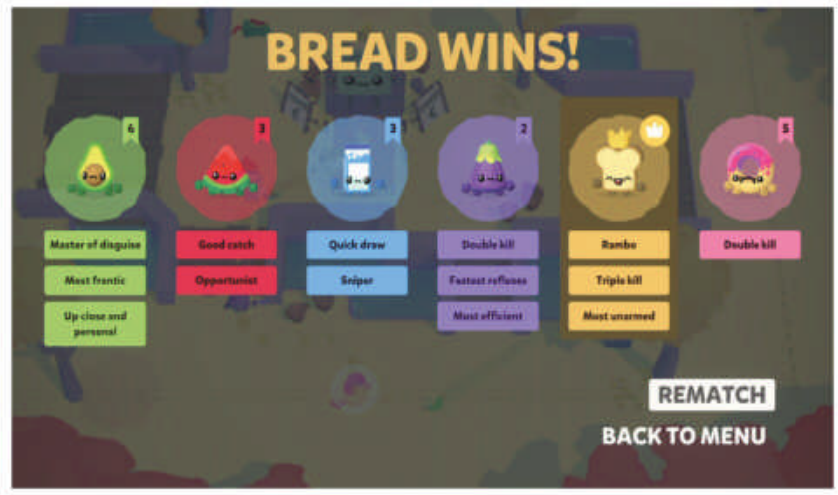
AVAILABILITY Released **WEBSITE** https://www.resynthgame.com/

Finally! Two of my favourite things; level editors and composing music, come together in one colourful experience. Resynth is a puzzle game meets tenori-on. Everything makes a sound. You're a shaker. Moveable blocks are pitched, but muted, until they're pushed into an empty square. Empty squares are also muted, until filled, then they sound more vibrantly. Rows, from bottom to top, are an F major pentatonic scale, on C. Columns, from left to right, are quavers comprising two bars of 4/4. Crosses, especially when lit, are percussion.

A complete piece is your reward for solving the level, revealed gradually, note by note. Dissonance is punishment for creating an unwinnable state, which you can undo horribly (in musical terms, give it a try) with Z. When you're stuck, the repetitiveness of the loop motivates you to keep trying. Purple blocks are basslines, pinks and yellows are melody, syncopation is structured into every level. It's relatively easy to unlock levels, much more difficult to master them. Note the (very musical) UI in the upper right corner of the screen.

The level editor is a challenge unto itself. It's surprisingly difficult to create a musical loop, with an interesting beat, while also making it challenging for a player to solve. If I could offer one suggestion, it would be to first fill the entire workspace, then remove all but the essential pieces. If this review sounds like a musicological analysis, that's because it has intersected with my work teaching tertiary game composers. Although I'd already decided to review Resynth, the developers provided my class with keys. I loved their levels as much as the official ones.





BOOMERANG FU

DEVELOPER Cranky Watermelon **PRICE** $21.50

AVAILABILITY Released **WEBSITE** https://www.boomerangfu.com/

Goddamn banana. I hate the thing. It's so soft and peely, begging to be sliced. Take your eyes off it for a second and it's become a crate, or plant pot, disguised, ready to pluck the stone right out of your avocado with a slash of its boomerang. And do not get me started on the donut. Party games. I generally wouldn't choose them, but I kept crossing paths with Boomerang Fu, at PAX Australia, even Beer and Pixels. Everyone was like, "This game is amazing." They were right. Why? It's your typical party game, while also being incredibly neat and somewhat more.

My favourite mode is Free for All, because it allows you to collect power-ups that persist across a range of thoughtfully crafted levels, with dangerous terrain, teleporters and levers to trigger hazards. Did the sushi pick up a second boomerang and the ability to dash through walls? That's trouble, on a maze level. Throwing boomerangs is less risky than slashing with them at close range, and they'll rebound off walls. I particularly like throwing, then positioning myself so that the boomerang will slice an adversary on its way magically back to my hand.

You should play Boomerang Fu after lunch, not before. And only when you're angry with food. I feel like this polished experience has given me the opportunity to finally appreciate Fruit Ninja, as well as a genre I don't often engage with; fruit slicing, I mean, party games. If I have any criticisms, it's that there isn't a D on the end of Fu, and that multiplayer online isn't available (at the time of writing). So, you'll have to invite everyone over and get out the nibblies. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a watermelon to mess up.

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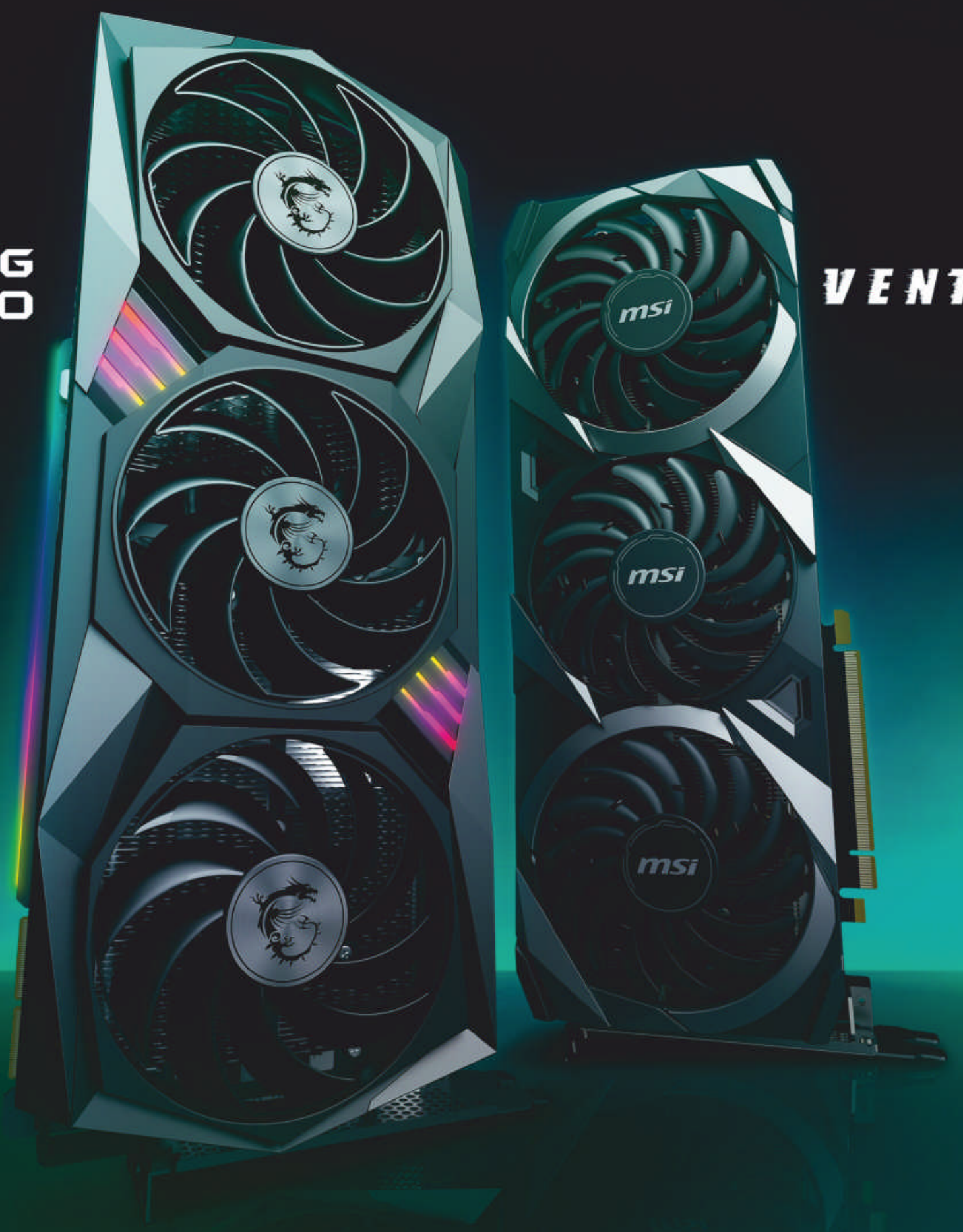

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THE TOP 100

THE BEST GAMES TO PLAY RIGHT NOW

Welcome to the official and definitive PCPowerPlay Top 100 list for 2020. This reflects the tastes and experiences of our entire team, from the big boss man all the way down to the lowliest word-grunt. We're not claiming these are the best games of all time, mind – that's a different list entirely. These are our recommendations for the best games to play right now, from modern smash hits, to indie gems you might have missed, to retro classics that still hold up in 2020. Enjoy!

PERSONAL PICK

James Davenport

HYLICS 2

As a Wayne of some importance, it's up to you to stop the reconstitution of Gibby so everyone can get back to slapping bugs. I'm still not sure what *Hylics 2* is about, but that's kind of OK. An absurdist RPG made of 3D-scanned clay models, it plays like a long-lost RPG from the 1970s.

PERSONAL PICK

Harry Shepherd

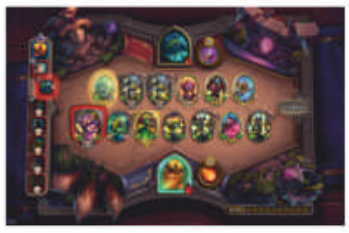
JOURNEY

This has long been my favourite videogame, and last year it finally found a home on PC. Enhanced by a majestic score from Austin Wintory, this two-hour epic sees you floating over sand dunes and sweeping through caves to reach a twinkling mountain peak. Pint-sized perfection.

100 TEAM FORTRESS 2

RELEASED 2007

Phil: It's true: *Team Fortress 2* is still good. Sure, it's 13 years old. And yes, it's gone through many changes – from hats to matchmaking. But for all the many hero shooters released in its wake, no other multiplayer FPS offers the same pick-up-and-play hilarity of a good *TF2* server. As an experimental sounding board of games-as-a-service ideas, the current *TF2* is weird and baggy. As a game about nine idiot characters competing over patches of gravel, it remains a triumph.



99 HEARTHSTONE

RELEASED 2014

Tim: Your view on the current state of *Hearthstone* depends on how you feel about three things. 1) The release of the new class: Demon Hunter. 2) How much you like super high variance cards like Dragonqueen Alexstraza. 3) Whether you play the Battlegrounds mode. I think Demon Hunter has been a success and helped refresh Standard. I'm less fond of those swing cards. And Battlegrounds is great, providing a welcome distraction when the Standard ladder looks grim.

98 SAYONARA WILD HEARTS

RELEASED 2019

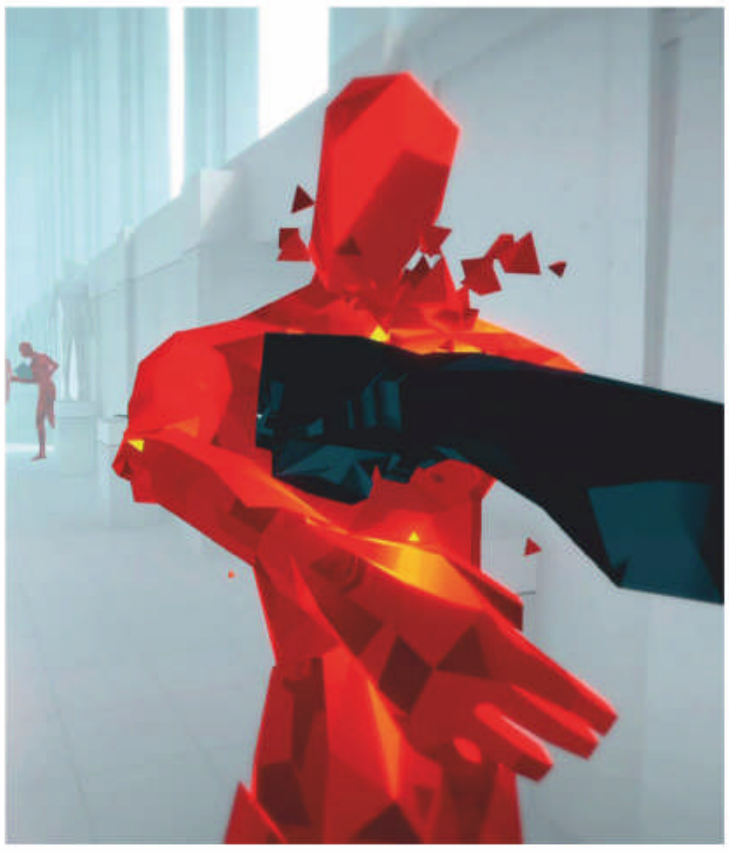
Jacob: This artful adventure straddles a line between techno-pop album and rhythm-action videogame. A belter of a soundtrack acts as a heartbeat to the game's meandering levels, and helps to direct you between the many obstacles in your way as you traverse psychedelic forests and high-speed city pursuits – oftentimes following a group of neon-clad bikers or theatre thugs that speak only through the medium of dance.

But beyond its 23 action-packed levels, there's a sense of progression that's far more personal. The game's protagonist starts out her journey by tumbling into an interdimensional highway following a traumatic life event. But it's not long before your masked alter ego is confident, collected and ready to reshape her world. *Sayonara Wild Hearts* is just as much a message of self-love as it is a musical journey. It takes roughly only an hour and a half for a single playthrough, yet like any good album you'll be wanting to come back again and again. If not for the achievement of reaching gold rank in every level, just to breath in the audio-visual experience. There are few videogames that are so wonderfully engrossing as *Sayonara Wild Hearts* with as little screen time – set aside an evening and lose yourself in it.

97 METRO EXODUS

RELEASED 2019

Andy K: It's an amazing, and strange, feeling leaving the claustrophobic gloom of Moscow behind and exploring the wider world in a *Metro* game. *Exodus* is a post-apocalyptic road trip that massively broadens the scope of the normally tunnel-based series. It's still the same game deep down, mixing scrappy, violent first-person combat with exploration and survival elements. But dramatic changes of scenery and bigger, more open maps, including a vast desert region, give the series a new lease of life. It also has a lot of heart; particularly aboard the Aurora, the train that's ferrying you and your friends across the wasteland. Here things get slower and quieter, letting you get to know your companions, and yourself, as you search for a better life in a shattered world.



96 SUPER HOT VR

RELEASED 2017

Graeme: This time-sensitive action-puzzler is proof high resolution textures and intricate animation aren't necessary for maximum immersion. For a bunch of shapes in a white void, the sense of presence as your dodge enemies is incredible – it's easy to forget the vague architecture around you isn't real. More than I'd like to admit, I've curled into a ball on the floor to avoid attacks, then tried picking myself up by leaning on objects that aren't actually real. Any game that leaves you crumpled in a heap on the floor is either very bad... or very good!

Time moving with your body movements is a top 'you are the controller' experience, too, showing good VR games aren't just the games you know but with a thing strapped to your head.

95 SLUDGE LIFE

RELEASED 2020

James: It's *Pokemon Snap* by way of *Marc Ecko's Getting Up* (now there's a franchise that really took off...). It's a first-person parkour sim full of dejected, piss-poor bottom feeders like me. Every frame is a photo ripped from a zine, every line of dialogue a potent zinger worthy of its own comic panel. Eat banana slugs and trip hard, float into the sky or under the sludge for a peek at reality. Spit into a CEO's food. Trigger a nuke. Walking sims certainly have come a long way, baby.

94 VALORANT

RELEASED 2020

Tyler: In our Top 100 meeting, Emma said that *Valorant* only made her want to play *CS:GO*. It's the opposite for me. Whenever I've tried to play *CS:GO*, it's felt like wandering into someone else's decade-old game of make believe – and no one will explain the unwritten rules to me. However, after just a few games of *Valorant*, I finally understood what my *CS:GO* friends had been talking about. It might be a watered down *CS:GO* to veterans like Emma, but for me, the quality of life features and special abilities, which let me at least feel useful while I got used to the weird shooting, were the on-boarding I needed. Now I can finally enjoy a type of FPS that always scared me away, and it rules.

93 THE JACKBOX PARTY PACK 4

RELEASED 2017

Robin: The *Jackbox* series is pure social lubricant. The right game deployed at the right time can make any party or gathering sing – whether you're with friends, relatives, or even people you don't know too well yet. And the simple mobile phone interface – with no app download required – means that anyone and everyone can get involved.

James: I didn't really know my mum until we played some *Jackbox* together. A preacher's daughter with a pretty clean no-cussing and no-vulgarity record, through the medium of *Jackbox* I've seen her draw dicks, make jokes about my death, and use words my dad swears he didn't teach her. It's a holiday tradition now, watching the person that raised me transform like this. Thank you, *Jackbox*.

92 FINAL FANTASY XII: THE ZODIAC AGE

RELEASED 2018

Wes: *FFXII* has the best English voice cast in the history of JRPGs. Square rounded up a group of British theatre actors and their performances still crackle with Shakespearean grandeur.

Andy K: There are so many beautiful, exotic locations in *FFXII*, I'm constantly finding new favourites as I traverse its world. There's a lot to love about the game, but the gambit system is an easy highlight. And you can fast forward through battles in the PC version – a massive time saver.

91 DEUS EX

RELEASED 2000

Phil: The Top 100 is a celebration of what's worth playing today, which is why many older favourites struggle to make the cut. It's not enough for a game to be influential if it's no longer much fun to play. The difference with *Deus Ex*, though, is that so much of what makes it great is tied to its age and antiquated, alienating systems. It's a game that I don't think could be made today, because the rules for FPS design are too formalised and streamlined. The original *Deus Ex* feels experimental and wild, the consequence of a development team that had to figure out how to let a player do what they want. Within that folly lies a magic that is yet to be replicated.

Andy K: Yeah, *Deus Ex* is still great. I've played it at least once a year for as long as I can remember, and every time I do, I'm stunned by how fun it still is. A lot of that comes from being familiar with the game, knowing how far I can push its systems. But that's really the beauty of it. It's as wide as it is deep, with big, intricate sandbox levels that are ripe for experimentation. Even now I'm finding new ways to play through it. This year it was the discovery that I could defuse the hostage situation in Battery Park, non-violently and without being detected, with a couple of flares and nothing else. I think that *Deus Ex* is PC gaming at its best.

90 C&C REMASTERED COLLECTION

RELEASED 2020

Andy K: Collecting the first *Command & Conquer* and its beloved sequel, *Red Alert*, this generously priced package is stuffed with some of the finest real-time strategy on PC. The remaster is great, with crisp new visuals and the option to instantly swap back to the old ones at the push of a button. But the real reason to play is the campaigns. Every mission is a satisfying puzzle to solve, rewarding creative use of the game's varied selection of units. And the FMV cutscenes are as fun as ever.

89 LEGEND OF GRIMROCK 2

RELEASED 2014

James: It's not surprising that the most *Dark Souls*-y game I've played in a while is basically its origin story. First-person dungeon crawlers like FromSoftware's *King's Field* don't get much play these days because, well, they're a dated pain in the ass to manoeuvre. *Grimrock 2* is a perfect modernisation of the genre, a frictionless, massive sprawl of puzzles and demons and dungeons that practically demand a graph paper notebook. But you don't need one because the notebook is baked in.

88 DOOM II

RELEASED 1994

Chris: This isn't just nostalgia talking – yes, *Doom II* is an influential classic, but it's still amazingly challenging and intense to play today, and not just as a history lesson. Though you will get to see the early origins of FPSes too. Plus, new *Doom II* mods are turning up on a weekly basis 25 years later. It's the one game you should never uninstall.

87 FALLOUT NEW VEGAS

RELEASED 2010

Robin: Sure, in the harsh light of 2020, *New Vegas* doesn't look or play all that great. It kind of didn't in 2010 either. But even now it's absolutely unparalleled when it comes to pure RPG freedom. The sheer amount of choice in who you can be and what you can do is intoxicating. It's a kind of depth and complexity that Bethesda's *Fallouts* just can't match.

86 SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

RELEASED 2016

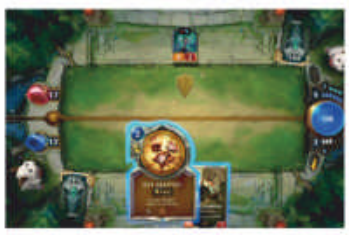
Fraser: *Shadow Tactics* is Mimimi's best stealth tactics game and a high point for sneaky, murderous romps. It takes the classic *Commandos* formula, conjures up even more elegant puzzles, refines everything, and gives you an adorable tanuki to help with your assassinations.

THE TOP 100

85 HOMEWORLD REMASTERED COLLECTION

RELEASED 2015

Fraser: No other RTS – heck, few other games – come close to matching *Homeworld*'s incredible style. The art, the soundtrack, the tragic sci-fi yarn – it's so lavish. Even the way the ships move is stirring. It's like watching a cosmic ballet. It's all so impressive that it threatens to overshadow the fact that *Homeworld*'s also a brilliant strategy game with a tricky, persistent campaign and the best space battles around.



84 LEGENDS OF RUNETERRA

RELEASED 2020

Robin: I love how much of a step forward for online CCGs this feels. That applies to the mechanics – where the best bits of *Hearthstone* and *MTG* are combined into a tight, strategic back-and-forth – but also to its business model, which does away with randomised packs and, brilliantly, just lets you build the decks you want to build.
Steven: Agreed. *Runeterra* is a welcome reprieve from booster pack bullshit. I never thought one of my favourite games of 2020 would be a card game.

83 ELITE DANGEROUS

RELEASED 2014

Andy K: This recently became my most played game on Steam, overtaking the likes of *The Witcher 3* and even my beloved *Euro Truck Simulator 2*, which should give you some idea of the impact it can have on a person's free time. I don't so much *play Elite Dangerous* as exist entirely within it, living a whole other life in space. It's a worryingly immersive game, whether you're hunting bounties, trading, or just freely exploring its scale replica of the Milky Way. Sure, it's grindy, and it's slow-paced, but the feeling of *being* there, of clawing a living out of a vast galaxy alongside thousands of other players, is a sci-fi dream come true. It plays totally fine with a gamepad, but for the truly dedicated starship captain, a flightstick really takes the game to another level.

82 SUNLESS SKIES

RELEASED 2019

Fraser: A very British game about travelling through space on a little locomotive might have been horribly twee in another studio's hands, but not Failbetter's. It's a mad and magical version of Victorian Britain transposed to the cosmos, where Queen Victoria has weird time powers and people live on floating chunks of rock – surprisingly picturesque ones – or massive space plants or steampunk metal behemoths. It makes space properly alien again, filling it with demons who were once bees, plenty of gothic horror, and, appropriately, a clockwork sun, all of which could drive your crew insane at any moment – and all these oddities are elevated by some of the best writing in games ever.

Robin: *Sunless Skies* is a game that operates entirely by its own logic – making progress feels like learning a language, a very particular way of talking about objectives and circumstances. It can be awkward to get to grips with, but it facilitates a world where loot is as likely to be a life-changing experience as a shiny treasure, and dreams can be earned and traded like currency. From its writing, to its art, to its mechanics, to its sometimes punishing cruelty, it's a game that 100% knows what it is and refuses to water that down, and I respect the hell out of that.

81 CRUSADER KINGS II

RELEASED 2012

Fraser: There's still nothing else quite like *Crusader Kings II*. Over the years Paradox has fleshed out its already gargantuan strategy RPG through dozens of expansions with changes both bold and granular. You can even dabble in witchcraft now. Its scope is ridiculous. And since all of those expansions came with even larger free updates, the base game hasn't stopped growing. It's also now entirely free. It may soon be supplanted, though, as its sequel has just released...

80 80 DAYS

RELEASED 2015

Andy K: In terms of writing, *80 Days* is one of the finest pieces of interactive fiction on PC, because it roots its superb storytelling in a compelling management loop. You're being told a fun, colourful story about a voyage around the world in a steampunk alternate history, but you're also juggling your budget and keeping your stoic master Phileas Fogg happy. Completing the journey in 80 days is difficult, but if you fail, it doesn't matter. You can try again, and the story will be totally different.

PERSONAL PICK

Phil Savage

GUILD WARS 2

Its combat is punchy and satisfying, its community is helpful and engaged, and its approach to levelling makes it easy to get involved in any of its regular updates. Many live service games would be improved if they took inspiration from *Guild Wars 2*'s model.

PERSONAL PICK

Rachel Watts

IF FOUND...

Dreamfeel's coming-of-age visual novel has gut-wrenching authenticity. It follows a trans woman's return to her hometown during the '90s, having to deal with the troubles of being a young queer adult. It's a story of crushes, concerts, and a black hole that threatens to destroy reality.

79 HADES

RELEASED 2018

Jacob: *Hades* manages to squeeze the fight, rinse, repeat roguelike structure into its narrative, and do so in a way that's genuinely entertaining. Each return trip back to *Hades*' Underworld is a chance to try out a new weapon or upgrade, and that's kept me coming back for more. Especially as the story changes as you go through different runs.

78 SEA OF THIEVES

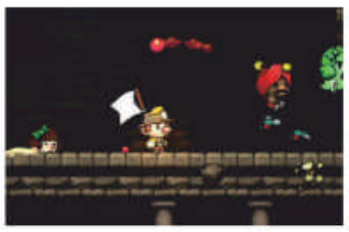
RELEASED 2018

Wes: Chris put my fish on the stove and left it cooking so long it set our ship on fire. On the *Sea of Thieves*, we make our own fun, despite it completely hampering our progress for a good while.
Chris: Well, there was also one time that Wes swung his sword at Tyler who was carrying an explosive barrel, and it killed our entire crew. Still fun!

77 CONTROL

RELEASED 2019

Robin: The thing that *Control* absolutely nails is atmosphere. Its weird world of supernatural bureaucracy is so wonderfully realised – both visually, with creative, brutalist surrealism, and in its world-building, fleshed out through dialogue and text logs that are equal parts hilarious and sinister. Even its vending machines are memorable.



76 SPELUNKY

RELEASED 2008

Emma: A simple, yet challenging roguelike adventure that punishes you for the tiniest mistakes. It's unique in that it offers a different experience depending on how far you're willing to explore. You're free to simply play through, make your way to Olmec's Lair, and finish the game. While this is perfectly satisfying, there are so many hidden areas and special items to discover that can enrich your journey along the way. It also features the cutest pug in any video game, ever.

75 FACTORIO

RELEASED 2016

Chris: Survival and crafting games can quickly become a slog of repetitive tasks, but Factorio's hook involves automating those jobs before you get sick of them. And it's something of a thrill to build the machines to do those tasks… and even more thrilling to realise you can build machines to build those machines. Once you've got a few assembly lines running smoothly it's easy to lose yourself in the glorious (and sometimes very messy) expansion of your busy little factories.

74 WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE II

RELEASED 2018

Robin: This year's lockdown has really solidified for me how good this game is. Trapped inside, I've had way more time for co-op gaming, and I think *Vermintide II* really is the best of the bunch – a worthy successor to *Left 4 Dead*. Plus it absolutely nails the Warhammer setting, always riding that line between humour and grimdarkness perfectly.
Jody: I've been enjoying *Deep Rock Galactic* and I still think *Left 4 Dead 2* is fun, but what *Vermintide II* has over other four-player co-op chaos games is its excellent first-person melee combat. It's the perfect quick 'woosh' and slow 'thunk' as big lumps of Renaissance metal bite into fur and skin. You get stuck in and the blood seeps in at the edges of the screen while you block and shove and swing till there's breathing room, then look around to make sure everyone else is standing. Then you do it again 12 more times and it's still fun.
Alan: *Vermintide II* is harsh, but in the best possible way. It challenges you, and then rewards your determination with a better understanding of the mechanics. You get slightly further with each run, gear upgrades embolden you, communication with your buddies becomes more nuanced, and before you know it you're facing down the Skittergate like the team of wisecracking baddasses that you are.

73 WHAT THE GOLF?

RELEASED 2019

Chris: A great way to make people laugh is to surprise them, and *What the Golf?* is almost constantly surprising. Golf is almost never just golf: it becomes soccer, driving, bowling, first-person shooting, archery, and more . And just when you think you've got a handle on things it'll switch it up on you, so instead of your bow shooting an arrow, it'll shoot 100 arrows. Or it'll launch you through the air instead. Just a great, hilarious barrage of gags.

Harry: Unlike real-life golf, Triband's experimental curio is wonderfully accessible. Every person I invited to play were immediately entranced – the drag-and-click controls are simple and satisfying enough to draw anyone in.

72 INVISIBLE INC

RELEASED 2015

Jody: Normally I'm a stickler for first-person stealth. You should be leaning around a corner, holding down Q or E while shifting slightly in your chair for no reason to see if there's a guard lurking there. *Invisible Inc.* makes you look down from above, pressing the peek icon instead, but it's still every bit as tense. Turn-based isometric stealth just as thrilling as the regular kind. *Invisible Inc.* understands cyberpunk as well, piling a miracle on top of another miracle.

Robin: There's something wonderfully swaggering about developer Klei reinventing stealth so perfectly with *Mark of the Ninja*... and then coming back to do it again in a totally different genre, completely nailing it twice in a row. That's true confidence.

71 EVE ONLINE

RELEASED 2003

Steven: It's frequently joked about as the best game to read about but never play, but that kind of outlook dismisses just what a unique and special game *EVE Online* is. Sure, it's a very cerebral experience that often boils down to staring at spreadsheets, but that's because it's so good at creating a virtual life that it successfully recreates even the most boring bits of living. Just don't play it alone – this is one MMO where multiplayer is practically mandatory.

PERSONAL PICK

Chris Livingston

WEST OF LOATHING

RDR2 isn't the only open world cowboy game on PC. *West of Loathing*'s art may just be simple stick figures, but the writing is brilliant and it's stuffed with jokes. I played long after I'd finished the main quest, just to make sure I'd found every last scrap of humour.

PERSONAL PICK

Robin Valentine

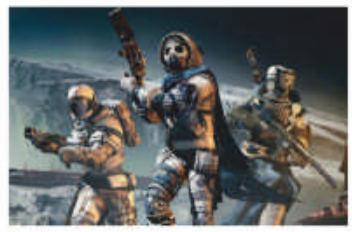
MORTAL KOMBAT 11

Not just the only fighting game with a genuinely good story campaign, but for my money the most accessible entry into the genre there's ever been. Easy combos, a slower pace and a whole suite of fantastic tutorials make this a gory showdown that anyone can enjoy.

70 WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RELEASED 2004

Steven: *World of Warcraft*'s been in a rough spot the last few years, which is why it's slid down a bit on our list. Despite the latest expansion, *Battle for Azeroth*, having a lot of issues that get in the way of what *WoW* does best, this is still a worthwhile and entertaining MMO full of adventure.
Fraser: I've quit yet again. After just coming back, too. But I know it's only going to be temporary, because nothing has ever scratched that MMO itch quite like *World of Warcraft* has done for me.



69 DESTINY 2

RELEASED 2017

Tim: Firstly, nice. Secondly, the reason for *Destiny 2*'s precipitous drop largely stems from how little the team likes the current seasonal model. The return of iconic character Saint-14 made *Season of Dawn* fun, and it had a decent new activity and weapons, but *Trials of Osiris* whiffing made *Season of Arrivals* feel really quite anaemic. This September's big expansion, *Beyond Light*, looks promising, with a whole new damage type and accompanying subclasses to play with.

68 WARFRAME

RELEASED 2013

Steven: *Warframe*'s last year hasn't exactly been its best. Ambitious updates like the new ship-to-ship combat were dragged down by bugs, poor balancing, and a grind that sometimes feels like a needless distraction. But even in spite of that, *Warframe* remains one of the best looter shooters you can play. It's just so weird and full of strange ideas that have slowly congealed into a shooter where one minute you're bullet-time sliding through a group of super mutant soldiers and the next you're dancing with your friends to a crude version of Darude's Sandstorm that you hand-programmed on the in-game synthesiser. That unique atmosphere keeps *Warframe* compelling even when Digital Extremes' unwillingness to play it safe bites it in the ass. Don't get me wrong, *Warframe* succeeds far more often than it fails. Though it's far more complex than other games, that complexity also creates an enormous amount of depth that's kept me playing for hundreds of hours. Though some might lament the lack of a true endgame, I really enjoy *Warframe*'s horizontal progression that encourages me to set my own goals, like crafting new warframes or unlocking new weapons, and experiment with its vast arsenal. Even if you're not a completionist, *Warframe* is worth playing just for the story.

67 DEVIL MAY CRY 5

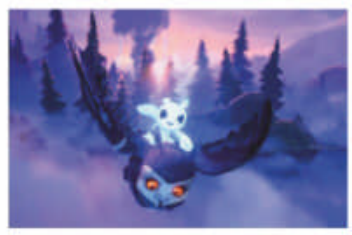
RELEASED 2019

Jacob: By the end of each *Devil May Cry 5* mission you will have shredded and ripped and crushed wave after wave of the underworld's nastiest hellspawn. While it's firmly rooted in its hack and slash history, a choice of three characters offers new opportunities to nail down precise combos and a varying blend of otherworldly and overly-excessive combat. When you finally mash the buttons just right, you're rewarded with an increasingly edgy soundtrack and a gory crescendo of blood, orbs, and rock organ.

66 HER STORY

RELEASED 2015

Andy K: *Her Story* is special because it tells a story in a way only a videogame could. It's a subdued police procedural with a distinctly British sensibility, told entirely out of order. You piece a suspect's story together by digging through a fragmented archive of short interrogation clips, tapping keywords into an old PC to uncover clues about what her story actually is. But the order you find the clips in, which is different for every person who plays the game, can distort your perception of the narrative in interesting ways. The detective story is as old as fiction itself, but *Her Story* is an excitingly fresh take on it. And if you want more, follow-up *Telling Lies* expands on the concept with a larger cast of characters and higher production values.



65 ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

RELEASED 2020

Emma: Easily one of the prettiest games to release in 2020. *Ori and the Will of the Wisps* is a Metroidvania that's truly rewarding to explore. New abilities are frequently introduced, encouraging you to thoroughly comb every inch of its beautiful map. Engaging in combat with enemies is difficult at first, but as you master your skill set, landing the perfect combo on a tough creature feels glorious. Be warned, its heartbreaking story will play on your mind for some time afterwards.

64 FROSTPUNK

RELEASED 2018

Jody: 11 Bit Studios' other game, *This War of Mine*, is part of the curriculum in Polish schools now. *Frostpunk* educated me more. For starters, this game about managing a steampunk city through an ice age taught me the value of child labour and religious zealotry.

I enacted harsh policies to keep citizens from freezing but found myself putting the brakes on as soon as I could. Sure, I passed the law allowing children to work because the engines were on the brink of failing. But when I transitioned them away from picking up coal to light kitchen duty, it felt like I was clawing back a society worth living in, scrambling up the hierarchy of needs. It's powerful stuff.

63 BLACK MESA

RELEASED 2020

Andy K: This ambitious fan-made remake is probably the best way to experience the first *Half-Life* on a modern PC. It differs from the source material in a lot of ways – particularly the greatly expanded (and improved) Xen chapters – so purists might argue otherwise. But with bigger, more dramatic levels, production values approaching *Half-Life 2*, and new puzzles and set-pieces, *Black Mesa* breathes new life into Gordon Freeman's debut adventure. It's astonishing that something this confidently made is, essentially, a fan project. And doubly so that Valve allowed them to sell it on its own distribution platform. If you've ever felt the urge to return to the Black Mesa facility, this is the perfect excuse to go and reintroduce your crowbar to some headcrabs.

62 EURO TRUCK SIMULATOR 2

RELEASED 2012

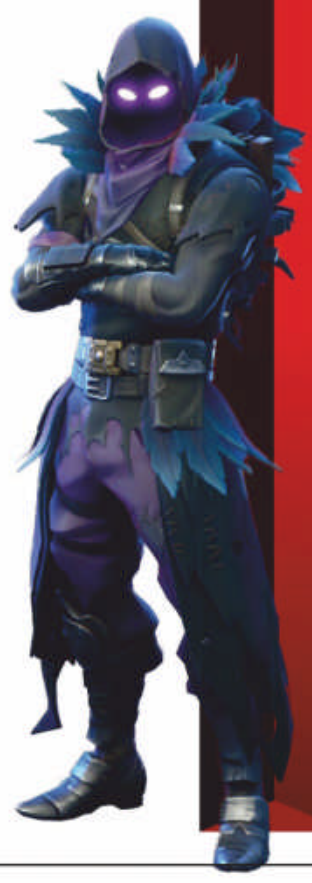
Andy K: It might not offer the high-speed thrills of *Forza*, but *ETS2* remains one of the best driving games on PC. Not only do its trucks feel great to drive, with weighty, nuanced handling, but its world is absolutely massive. You can drive from the UK to Russia, stopping at Scandinavia, Eastern Europe, and a dozen other countries along the way, which makes it a brilliant road trip simulator. It's also very chill. I always have it installed in case I ever feel the need to hit the road and de-stress.

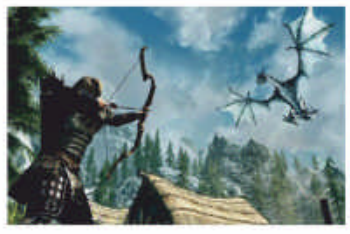
61 FORTNITE

RELEASED 2017

James: In 2020, you could catch a live viewing of Inception inside *Fortnite*. During a time when theatres are closed all over the world, I could watch a movie in a communal space with other people. Travis Scott put on a psychedelic show that drew 12.3 million viewers and doubled as his official music video. Party Royale arrived with its weekly EDM shows and non-violent pub games. Epic turned the damn game off for days *for marketing purposes*.

Fortnite is still firmly embedded in modern gaming culture. It'll be around for the next decade, easily, and remain popular throughout. For good reason, too. It's a COVID-19 era concert and movie venue. It's a creative sandbox filled with thousands of unique, user-created platforming challenges, combat arenas, and escape rooms. It's a base-defence game layered with RPG systems and loot drops for endless replayability. And, yeah, it's still an excellent battle royale shooter that's still surprising me with every seasonal refresh. We've already seen NPC-patrolled spy bases that turn certain areas into tiny infiltration and deception arenas, and now Epic's flooded half the map, transforming every scrap of land into a highly contested hot spot – never mind the sharks sailing through the air to ruin campers. Still free, still fantastic.





60 THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM

RELEASED 2011

Fraser: *Skyrim* is the forever game, nearly a decade old now and still kicking around. It is very large and very good, but it's really stayed relevant because of the number of mods that its community has churned out. Whole new games have been built out of it, along with a slew of improvements that you shouldn't start your journey without.
Jody: Now that expansion-sized mods like *Legacy of the Dragonborn* are exploring the *Special Edition*'s possibilities, *Skyrim* feels reborn. Dragon-reborn.

59 CAVES OF QUD

RELEASED 2015

Steven: A dark horse if there ever was one, *Caves of Qud* is the best RPG you're not playing. It's like *Dwarf Fortress*, except much less daunting and centred on a strange, alien world with some of my favourite writing in games. Each time you play, whole cultural histories are randomly generated for you to learn about as you pick through the dilapidated ruins of Qud's lost civilisations. It's a cerebral, ambitious, and impressive RPG with a humble ASCII-esque art style.

58 STALKER: CALL OF PRIPYAT

RELEASED 2010

Chris: You'll probably want to mod the hell out of it these days to get it slightly more up to snuff. But even in its vanilla form, it's unmatched in the sense of dread it provides. Most games eventually turn you into a superhero, but *STALKER* never lets you forget you're just a squishy mortal and that an unceremonious death can happen at any second.

57 UNAVOWED

RELEASED 2018

Fraser: Urban fantasy with a dash of BioWare's companions and consequences, *Unavowed* feels like a reimagining of classic point-and-click adventures. It's steeped in puzzles – most expertly woven into the story – and handsome pixel art, but it also offers more freedom to chart the course of your adventure, giving you authorship over the story.

56 PREY

RELEASED 2017

Jody: *Prey* is a spooky space station game in which you play prop hunt, where any medkit could actually be a spider-monster while you have a glue gun and Nerf darts. It's not just another space station game. It's the ultimate. Arkane didn't remake *Prey*, they made *System Shock 3* and then called it *Prey*.

THE TOP 100

55 SESSION

RELEASED 2019 |

James: You can play *Session* with classic *Skate* controls. Cool and fine. Or, if you're a maniac like me, you can control each foot with a stick and turn on manual catching and kick strength and spin power to make *Session* into a skateboard *QWOP*. It makes a single flatland, crawling kickflip a pretty big accomplishment, and I'll never be a good virtual skater. But like the early '00s, I'm watching the best of the best begin to emerge from the virtual scene, with players like JAHDexe making legit, unique skate videos. There's even a *Session* collective, Dizzy Skateboarding Co., highlighting the cream of the crop in montages that take me back to the best Girl's Yeah Right or Zero's Misled Youth.

54 RESIDENT EVIL 2

RELEASED 2019 |

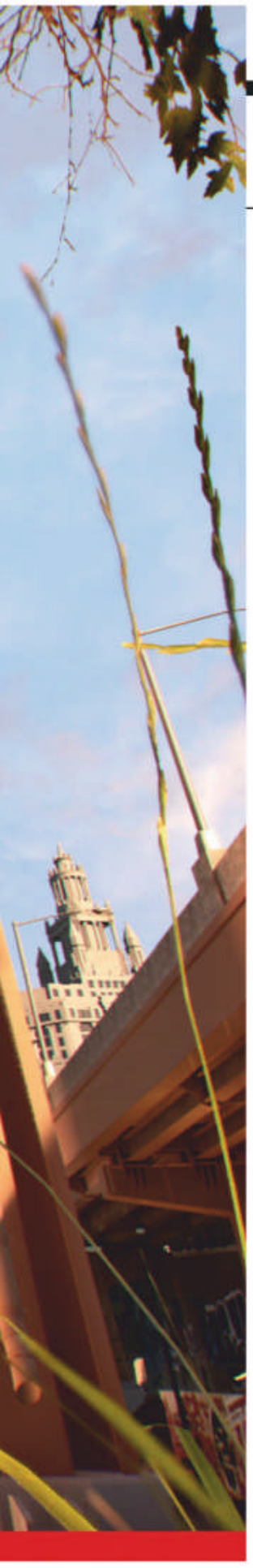
Robin: I never even played the original *Resi 2*, and I *still* adored this remake. It absolutely stands up on its merits as just a fantastic bit of survival horror. It's such a pleasure picking your way through its intricate maps – solving puzzles, finding secrets, and trying not to get eaten. Controversial opinion, though: I could've done without Mr X. He's too mechanical to be scary, but enough of an obstacle to be incredibly frustrating. I just wanted to poke around at my leisure.

53 DUSK

RELEASED 2018 |

Tyler: I find *Dusk* to be quite ugly compared to other recent FPS throwbacks like *Amid Evil* and *Ion Fury*, but having been a *Quake* fan, I do get a whole heap of nostalgia from it. And it plays just right if you're fond of the classics: you move as if you're on ice skates and shoot like you're playing a clicker game.

Tom: Even the reload animations are fun in this fond reflection of old-school shooters. You don't even have hands, but you can still spin your floating twin shotguns to magically put new shells into the barrel. The levels travel between B-movie genres, and are actually funny. I've never thought of level design as a medium for humour, but when I head off down a tunnel and suddenly fight a giant alligator for no reason, I can't help but laugh.



52 STARDEW VALLEY

RELEASED 2016

Rachel: This slice-of-life sim is a pocket of calm, especially in these trying times, letting you escape into a world of simple agriculture. Planting, nurturing, and harvesting crops is a gentle process, and getting to know the personalities and quirks of the residents in Pelican Town breaks up your farming jobs nicely. You can build any type of farm you like, from a profitable vegetable empire to a cosy barn with a few flower patches. Being plonked on a huge empty lot might seem a little daunting, but once you settle into a routine the seasons will fly by.

Seeing the money roll in from your epic shipment of green beans after nurturing them for ten straight days is a feeling like no other – almost as good a rush as reaching a new level of friendship with one of the town's inhabitants and uncovering some new aspect of their story. Getting to know the community and learning about the underlying magic of the town always gives you more to discover. *Stardew Valley* is both a blessing and a curse: it's so peaceful, it will make your heart ache for the tranquility of the countryside.

Fraser: I get to live out the fantasy of not killing every plant I try to grow and the fantasy of having a thriving social life. I cannot recommended this highly enough for plant-killing hermits.

51 PATH OF EXILE

RELEASED 2013

Steven: Quarterly expansions continue to reinvent the base game in strange, exciting new ways. Its current expansion lets you tend a garden by planting seeds that grow monsters for you to kill for loot. It's so weird, but I love how consistently *Path of Exile* makes clicking on things until they die fun. I've only scraped the surface of its more complex systems and endgame, and frequent updates have kept it from ageing. This is still the king of ARPGs.

50 GRAND THEFT AUTO V

RELEASED 2015

Chris: It's been long enough that I've forgotten most of the details of the 40-hour story, but who cares? *GTA V* remains a glorious sandbox of destruction and mayhem, even without a story. You can grab some friends and go bananas in *GTA Online* together, or go on a reckless stunt-driving and plane-stealing spree alone in single-player. Thousands of mods keep it fresh, but it barely needs them. And I will keep happily playing *GTA V* until the next one comes along.

PERSONAL PICK

Andy Kelly

L.A. NOIRE

This lavish replica of 1940s Los Angeles is a dream for anyone who's ever watched a film noir or read a Raymond Chandler novel and wished they could *be* there. And a cast of genuinely great actors (including several familiar faces from Mad Men) really brings the story to life.

PERSONAL PICK

Jacob Ridley

FLORENCE

A beautiful snapshot of falling in, and drifting out of, love. It's delivered through simple interactions – each puzzle is intrinsically tied to Florence's thoughts and feelings. But even beyond its affirming story, the game offers a vibrant art style brought to life by wonderful music.

49 OPUS MAGNUM

RELEASED 2017

Tyler: A brilliant puzzle game. Each level is a condensed factory-building problem with many solutions, but only some are elegant enough to feel satisfying. It's the only puzzle game where, after finally solving a level, I've refused to move on to the next one because I knew I could solve it better. And that is one of its major appeals – getting better.

48 MINECRAFT

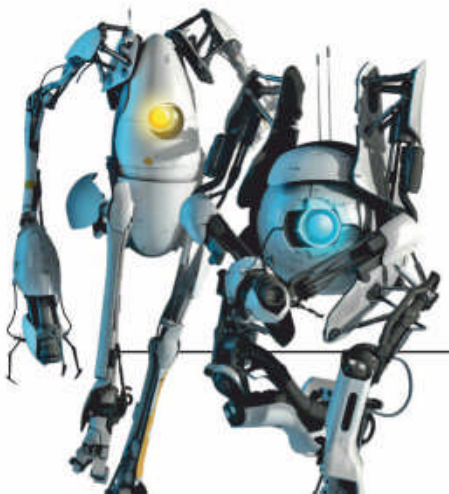
RELEASED 2009

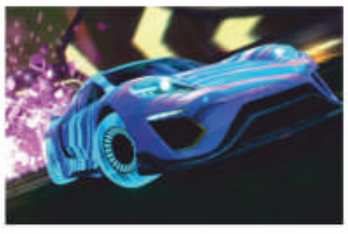
Rachel: The ultimate digital playground for creativity. This blocky sandbox has inspired a whole generation of players, from kids to an industry of professional builders. Projects like the Uncensored Library, the charity Block By Block, and hundreds of other initiatives prove that *Minecraft* is a gaming force for good.

47 PORTAL 2

RELEASED 2011

Wes: The funniest game ever written? Likely. More importantly, *Portal 2* is the finest example of the Steam Workshop's success, with a near-infinite selection of user-made maps. I played the campaign once, but many more weekends with a co-op friend, hungry for new puzzles to punish our brains with.





46 ROCKET LEAGUE

RELEASED 2015

Tyler: You don't hear much about *Rocket League* these days, but you don't hear about bowling, either, and people haven't stopped playing that. As other competitive games come and go, *Rocket League* remains an immovable pastime. It isn't just because 'soccer, but with cars' was a novel idea. Others have tried to replicate *Rocket League* and have failed because they lack the subtle controls that enable fake outs, trick shots, and passing plays. After 1,000 hours, I'm still trying to air dribble properly.

45 CIVILIZATION VI

RELEASED 2016

Fraser: *Civ* typically gets two expansions before the focus shifts to the next one, but *Civ VI* is unexpectedly still going. It's definitely shaping up to be the densest of the 4X series, with more civs and scenarios still coming, and with the big changes the base game made to cities, and the expansions' interesting experiments with golden ages, dark ages, and climate change, it's another strong entry in the immortal series. And now you can also convert cities with rock bands.

44 ARMA 3

RELEASED 2013

Fraser: A serious, daunting military sim that conjures up an infinite supply of agonisingly tense sniper duels, convoy ambushes, night-time raids and all-out battles. But for extended lengths of time it's horrifyingly quiet, full of long build-ups as you crawl through undergrowth, nervously dash through exposed areas, and constantly keep an eye out for any signs of life. And then there's the crackle of gunfire, or a sniper's shot echoing through a valley, and you're diving behind cover, trying to figure out where it's coming from. Instead of being a gun on legs, you're a vulnerable soldier, but also a flexible one. You can quickly shift between different horizontal and vertical stances, giving you a great deal of fine control over your body. Usually it's a treat to be able to just go prone, but *Arma 3*'s got an absurd nine stances. So even when it's at its most stressful, you'll always feel in control, empowered by a long list of options, as well as fancy military toys.

But that's just one facet of a much larger creative sandbox. Thanks to an army of modders, *Arma 3* can be pretty much anything. Even its official DLC takes things in unexpected directions, like go-karting or an entire campaign dedicated to first contact with aliens.

43 METAL GEAR SOLID V

RELEASED 2015

Jorge: Hideo Kojima's swan song to the *Metal Gear* franchise before his unceremonious departure from Konami to start his own studio, *MGSV* is one of the best stealth-action games you can get your hands on. This ambitious sandbox game values your freedom to handle any mission you see fit over anything else. Sneaking around bases with your dog, to calling in a chopper that's blasting Hall and Oates' Maneater as back-up are just a tiny fraction of the hijinks you'll get into. Combine this with the trademark *Metal Gear* anime-esque melodrama that will leave you both speechless and slightly confused as you manage the highs and lows of running a private army.

42 ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY

RELEASED 2018

Robin: I think *Odyssey*'s often really underrated – dismissed as just another Ubisoft sandbox. Sure, it's got way too much bloat, and its *Witcher*-like RPG aspirations don't always gel super well with *Assassin's Creed*'s accumulated mechanical baggage. But its world is just completely spectacular. Even if you don't enjoy the action, you've got to recognise what a technical marvel its realisation of Ancient Greece is – utterly huge and packed with authentic detail and mythological wonder. Few digital spaces are as breath-taking to simply travel across, and after nearly 100 hours, I still don't feel like I've seen everything it has to offer. Between this and *Origins*, I'm actually excited about the future of the series again, which feels miraculous.

41 HALO: THE MASTER CHIEF COLLECTION

RELEASED 2019

Wes: *Halo* was the first FPS to nail shooting on a gamepad, but once you play on PC, with mouse and keyboard and a 144Hz monitor, there's no going back. With each game added *The Master Chief Collection* becomes a better deal on PC. They look old, but the campaigns still offer some of the best sandbox level design in shooter history, and multiplayer runs so smoothly on modern dedicated servers.
Steven: Does *Halo* really need to be justified? It's fuckin' *Halo*!

PERSONAL PICK

Alan Dexter

MTG ARENA

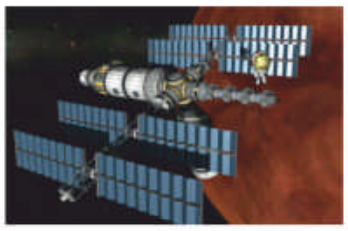
What's that? *MTG Arena* isn't on the list? An oversight, surely. If you want to exercise your grey matter there isn't a game that comes close. I've been playing the cardboard version for over 20 years and this is the best digital incarnation. The fact I still play daily is all the recommendation needed.

PERSONAL PICK

Fraser Brown

THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

An analysis of some levels from the perspective of a designer and fan, *The Beginner's Guide* is a fascinating exploration of game design that becomes something so much more. It's insightful and uncomfortable and... I'm going to leave it there.

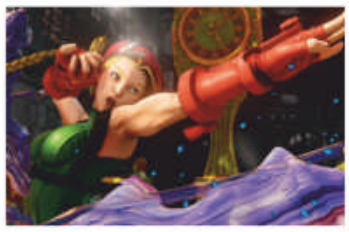


40 KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM

RELEASED 2015

Wes: I'm psyched for *Kerbal Space Program 2*, coming out next year, which will include co-op. Until then, there's nothing else on PC like *Kerbal*, a game that will inspire you to learn basic rocket physics and feel like a damn genius for every accomplishment.

Chris: As kind of a dummy, it's nice that a game filled with complicated science stuff is still fun even when you fail. Blowing up a rocket or stranding an adorable astronaut in space is met with laughs, not frustration.



39 STREET FIGHTER V

RELEASED 2016

Emma: *Street Fighter V* may not have been in the best shape when it launched, but Capcom has nursed it into a fighting game that lives up to its legacy. Its roster of iconic returning characters – alongside a few new challengers – accommodates a wide range of playstyles that are fun to learn how to counter. More than anything, I respect it for how welcoming it is for beginners. Perfect execution is still a steep grind for novices, but it's more forgiving than previous iterations.

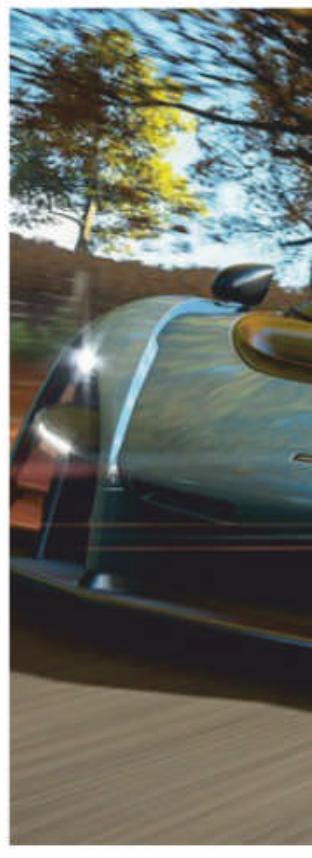
38 COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

RELEASED 2012

Emma: I can't imagine a Top 100 list that doesn't feature *Counter-Strike*. For me, it's synonymous with PC gaming. Its community is frequently highlighted for its toxicity and this can make it daunting to queue into competitive matches solo. That said, I've made some lovely friends while grinding through its skill groups, and forming a premade squad took over my Friday nights for the best part of a year.

Counter-Strike: Global Offensive offers a precarious balance of electrifying highs and rock bottom lows that make it just as easy to criticise as it is to fall in love with it. In a good session, the thrills of clutching an important round, or annihilating the other team with a 16-0 finish can put me in a damn good mood for the rest of the day. On the flip side, seeing my performance dip low enough to have me questioning why I haven't deranked already will leave me sulking in defeat.

No other game has managed to replicate the same weight behind its weapons, or the heart rate spikes I suffer as I creep onto its bombsites. From the pride I take in lining up a perfect smoke, to the satisfying one-taps I land with the USP-S, there's no substitute. Especially not *Valorant*. Got that, Tyler?



37 SUBNAUTICA

RELEASED 2018

Jody: When I want to have a good time in the ocean, frolic with some dolphins and swim through schools of tropical fish, I play *Abzu*. When I want to have a bad time in the ocean I play *Subnautica*. There are behemoths with eyes bigger than your body who look at you like just maybe you're a morsel worth opening their colossal maw for. There are razormouth jerkfish who will saw your bones because you had the audacity to swim near *their* weeds. There are things beyond description in the crushing depths where it feels like physics don't apply. I don't know why I play *Subnautica* actually, but I'll never forget it.

36 FORZA HORIZON 4

RELEASED 2018

James: It's been a stressful year. And whenever I'm stressed, which is always, I meditate. Find a centre, breathe, step outside my thoughts. But *Forza Horizon 4* is home to perhaps the most potent meditative technique I practice: driving expensive cars through fences and over hummocks (and the occasional hillock) in the English countryside. The *Horizon* series is still the most blissful, accessible, whatever-you-want-it-to-be car game around. I tend to spend a lot of time applying dumb liveries to vans and driving them off cliffs because a van suspended in mid-air feels like a form of existential protest to me. To hell with gravity and roads and lightweight chassis. I'm a van and I can fly. Anyway, you can race cars in *Horizon 4* too, I guess.

35 MONSTER HUNTER WORLD

RELEASED 2018

Robin: There are few things in games as tense and exciting as one of *Monster Hunter World*'s monster fights. It's essentially a game of endless boss battles, with exploring and RPG tinkering in between, and they're the best boss battles in the business – dynamic, unpredictable brawls where you can be about to lay the killing blow on a fire-breathing tyrannosaurus rex, only to be interrupted by a screeching dragon furious you've stumbled into its territory.

34 SUPER MEGA BASEBALL 3

RELEASED 2020

Chris: It's been a real pleasure watching this cartoony baseball series grow from a fun but casual action game into a sim with real managerial depth and challenge. Franchise mode is excellent, allowing you to enhance the skills of individual players over the course of the season, sign and release players, and see veterans retire and rookies appear over the winter break, giving your team an evolving history and continuity. Customisation lets you control everything from the logo on your team's caps to the structure of the post-season. And Pennant Race is a great online mode challenging you to climb the ladder in a series of games against friends or other players. Metalhead Software swung for the fences and really connected.

33 COMPANY OF HEROES

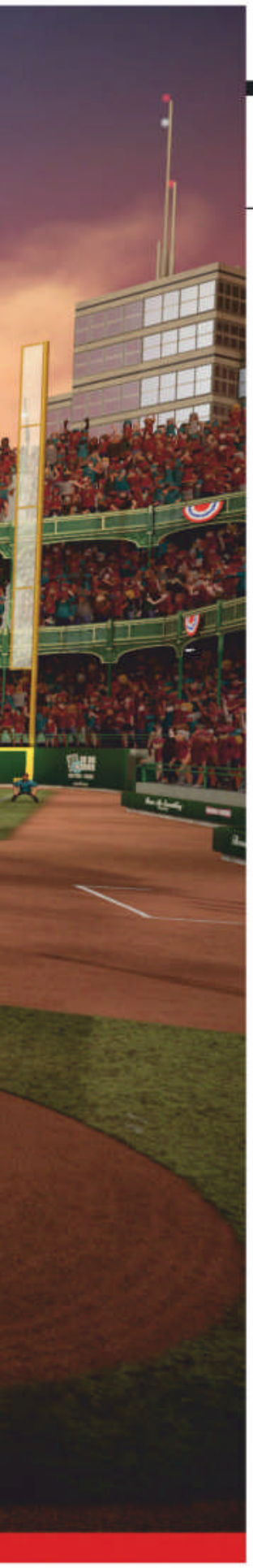
RELEASED 2006

Dave: Where do you go after the vast scale of the *Homeworld* games, and 40,000 years into the future with *Dawn of War*? Super small-scale squad-based World War II, obviously. It might not have been the most obvious choice of theatre, but Relic made an RTS that's intimate, brutal, engaging, and intricately tactical. The campaigns themselves are a blast, added to with smart standalone DLC introducing tangibly different factions, and the multiplayer experience delivers some of the most intense, entertaining experiences I've ever had mowing down hordes of Nazis. It was the blueprint for future *Dawn of War* games, and is a title that still gets installed on my rig for a quick blast whenever I find myself coming down off a Dan Carlin binge.

32 CITIES: SKYLINES

RELEASED 2015

Fraser: *Cities: Skylines* has maintained its position as the best city builder for five years now and shows no signs of giving up the crown. The modding community has played a big role in its longevity, churning out a mountain of cosmetic and mechanical changes. I've got something like 200 mods that are just cyberpunk. Every time I think I'm tapped out and can't build another district, I'm seduced back in for another urban planning experiment. I'll be here until there's a sequel.

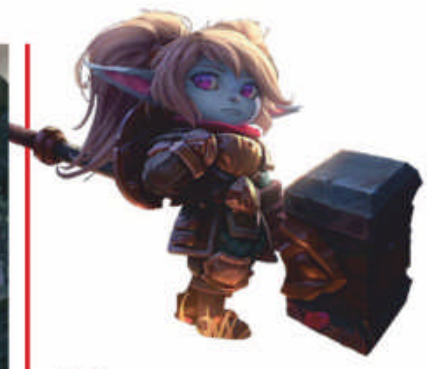


31 DARK SOULS REMASTERED

RELEASED 2018

Wes: I still marvel at the audacity to put an entire area, Ash Lake, behind an invisible wall that many players will never find. *Dark Souls*' commitment to player discovery is what makes its unforgiving world so entrancing. And the multiplayer is still one-of-a-kind, which is why the hour-long standoff I had with another player over what I thought were traps – but were actually harmless glowing pebbles they put down to taunt me – is still one of my favourite gaming memories.

James: *Dark Souls* isn't perfect, but it's perfect enough to forgive the dreadfully depressing Demon Ruins and Lost Izalith, which is why I'm high-jacking this space to put out an important PSA. Everyone knows *Dark Souls* is good. But *Dark Souls 2*? It's the one to play right now, especially if you haven't yet. It's not as tonally or visually consistent, but the breadth of monster designs, especially in the bosses is unmatched. Fight a frog that pukes out a huge desiccated face. Take down the entire skeleton hierarchy. Trip up a ghost carriage in an ancient coliseum. And do it all dressed as a human butterfly, maybe a jester, perhaps some wooly mammoth cosplay. Stage dive into the heart of chaos in the most metal boss fight in possibly any game. Give the much unloved middle child its own special day.



28 LEAGUE OF LEGENDS

RELEASED 2009

Steven: *League of Legends* defined esports, but even 11 years on it also continues to be a ridiculously fun and challenging game. Recent changes in season ten make matches even more dynamic and unpredictable in a good way, and Riot's aggressive balancing keeps the competition fierce. If you've not played it before, it's never to late to learn.

27 ALIEN: ISOLATION

RELEASED 2014

Andy K: The best horror game on PC. Your alien adversary is unpredictable, dynamic, and adaptive, which makes it a terrifying thing to have stalking you from the shadows of Sevastopol. And the space station's hard-edged sci-fi aesthetic, inspired by the 1979 movie, is to die for. Literally, if you spend too long standing around admiring it.

30 TERRARIA

RELEASED 2011

Wes: I paid ten bucks for *Terraria* nine years ago, played many hours of it, and was satisfied. It's surreal to go back to it in 2020, after its last (free) major update, to find the same compelling crafting and exploration expanded with literally thousands of items, massive bosses, and secrets I have to read a wiki to find. Those additions long ago distinguished *Terraria* from being a 2D *Minecraft* clone, but it's still staggering just how much awaits discovery in this game.

29 BATTLETECH

RELEASED 2018 | **LAST POSITION** New

Fraser: There's something very calming about putting together killing machines. Sticking jetpacks on axe-wielding behemoths, swapping out piddly little lasers for armour-melting super cannons – it's not a bad life. The battles are great, of course, but I'm always excited to get back to the garage so I can tweak my lance.

Jorge: *Battletech* has everything I want: space politics, giant mechs, and the never-ending dread of trying to keep my band of mercenaries from going bankrupt.

26 WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

RELEASED 2017

Rachel: This first-person adventure game is a collection of strange, fantastical tales about the deceased Finch household. As the last living member, Edith has returned to the family home to discover her relative's hidden histories and how each member met their unfortunate end. A touching story that is masterfully told.

25 RAINBOW SIX SIEGE

RELEASED 2015

Harry: *Rainbow Six Siege* is both complex and beautifully simple. On the surface, all you need to do is capture/defend your objective, so beginners can quickly grasp the aim of the game, but veterans with thousands of hours clocked can still find plenty of ways to improve all the way up to professional level. It's a game where, with guns that can end your round with one bullet and hundreds of tactical micro decisions needing to be made in its many intense moments, I often need half an hour to calm down after a session. Recent new operators and revamps to some of its labyrinthine maps have been strong, too, but the battle against toxicity and bugs isn't over.

24 PERSONA 4 GOLDEN

RELEASED 2020

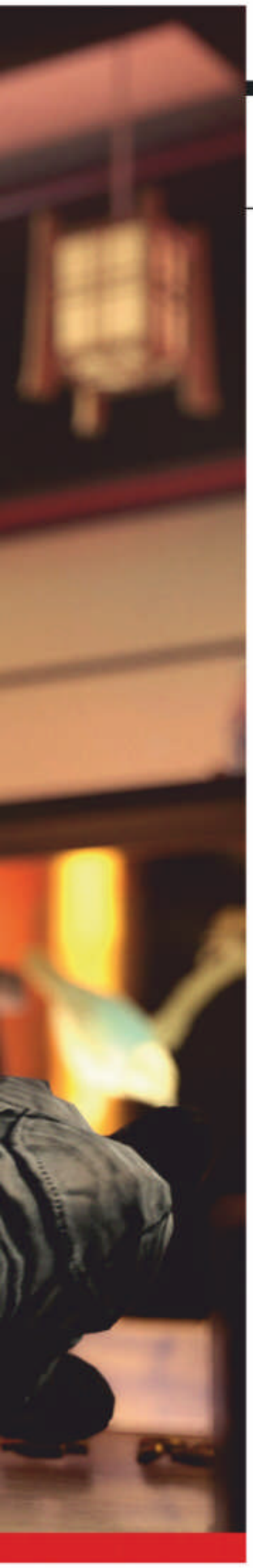
Robin: This iconic JRPG boasts all the usual tropes: dungeons, battles, attacking and dethroning God, etc. But it's in the mundane, not the supernatural, that it grabs you. It's got a wonderful sense of place, its Japanese town utterly evocative and authentic as you progress through the seasons. And even more lovely is its cast of characters – a tight-knit crew of goofballs and misfits that form one of the most convincing and endearing friendship groups in games.

23 RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

RELEASED 2018

Wes: There's no better feeling than noticing some tiny detail – could that really be a clue? I think it just might be! – and being rewarded by *Obra Dinn*'s enthusiastic burst of music when properly guessing how one of these sailors met their grisly end. For a little clue – you have to pay attention to everyone's shirt – and that's all I'm saying on that.

Rachel: Lucas Pope's haunting detective game makes you witness things that have only existed in the gossip of sailors. Its bleached 1-bit visuals invite players to look a little closer before a chilling realisation sinks in. It's one of the best mysteries on PC, and if becoming an expert on all the different crew on a merchant ship from the 1800s sounds like fun, then this game will be right up your galley.



22 TOTAL WAR: THREE KINGDOMS

RELEASED 2019

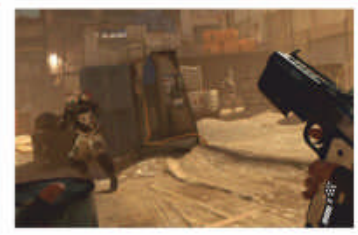
Steven: Total War has explored several important historical periods, but none of them feel as fully realised as *Three Kingdoms*. That's because *Three Kingdoms*' emphasises the characters that defined that era of Chinese history, making for a dramatic and fun strategy game with a lot of wonderful little flourishes and quirks. I love how factions are now defined by the personality of their leaders, like the conniving Cao Cao or the ageing dignity of Liu Bao, and how that focus on personality also makes diplomacy actually matter over the course of a campaign. Instead of fighting faceless factions, you're sitting down with enemy generals with their own stories, motivations and weaknesses, and it makes the battles feel all the more intense when they're the result of interpersonal conflict between warlords.

Fraser: Right out the gate, *Three Kingdoms* was already a strong contender for the best *Total War* game, and since launch Creative Assembly has only added more to make it stand apart from the rest of the series. Expansions have introduced new campaigns that slot neatly into the regular campaign, fleshing out the timeline with more events and factions. The campaign is now even better, with a huge variety of starting scenarios and a bunch of new factions with unusual mechanics.

21 FINAL FANTASY XIV

RELEASED 2013

Steven: If there's one MMO you should play in 2020, *FFXIV* is it. The latest expansion uses years of careful character development to deliver a dimension-spanning gut-punch that rivals the series' best, and I really enjoy how *FFXIV* tells such a coherent yet expansive story. It's just a joy to play. Its classes are fun, and dungeons and bosses are so unique and well-crafted that I don't mind running them over and over again for new gear.



20 HALF-LIFE: ALYX

RELEASED 2020

Tyler: I don't like the horror aspects. I'm a wuss, and handling zombie corpses in VR makes me too nervous. Handling all other things with the Gravity Gloves, however, is fantastic. It's like you're Thor and everything is your hammer.

Chris: I was skeptical a game sandwiched between *Half-Life 1* and *2* could do much story-wise, but I'm happy to be proven wrong. *Half-Life: Alyx* invigorated a storyline I've been invested in for over 20 years with some thrilling revelations.

PERSONAL PICK

Wes Fenlon

SATISFACTORY

It's really all in the name. Even incomplete in Early Access, this factory building sim is so damn satisfying in how it lets you optimise designs, then sit back and watch your elaborate construction whir with life. God I love building things that build things that build things that build...

PERSONAL PICK

Dave James

FOOTBALL MANAGER

There is always a long-term *FM* career going on my home PC, and stored in the cloud so I can access whenever, from wherever. It's my happy place, even when it's making me more angry than a bunch of computer people have a right to. It's also the best RPG going. Fight me.

19 INTO THE BREACH

RELEASED 2018

Jody: Not even *XCOM: Chimera Squad*'s missions are perfectly bite-sized like *Into the Breach*'s snacky levels. Strategy games are usually life-devouring posture-killers. Not so with *Into the Breach*. Move mechs, trick giant insects into smacking into mountains, and you're done. One step closer to saving a world, time left to walk the dog.

18 THE SIMS 4

RELEASED 2020

Chris: It'll cost an arm and a leg to keep up with the seemingly endless amount of expensive add-ons, but there are simply no other games out there quite like *The Sims* series. Whether you play casually or devotedly, it remains an utterly absorbing, occasionally morbid, often hilarious dollhouse, person simulator and multiple story generator.

17 APEX LEGENDS

RELEASED 2019

Phil: For the longest time I thought battle royales weren't for me. *Apex Legends* changed that, by encouraging me not to hide away like a coward, but to embrace the speed, manoeuvrability, and lethality of its design and go looking for a fight. I'm a convert – I've already logged 180 hours since March, and I won't be stopping anytime soon.

16 YAKUZA 0

RELEASED 2018

Jorge: You come to *Yakuza 0* for the Japanese '80s crime drama, but you'll stay for the over-the-top fights and wholesome character moments as you try to improve the lives of the citizens of Kamurocho. Also, seeing the series' beloved protagonists, Kiryu and Majima, in their awkward 20s struggling to figure out what kind of men they want to be is surprisingly relatable. The *Yakuza* franchise has been around since 2004 and *Yakuza 0* is the perfect introduction to the series.

15 HITMAN 2

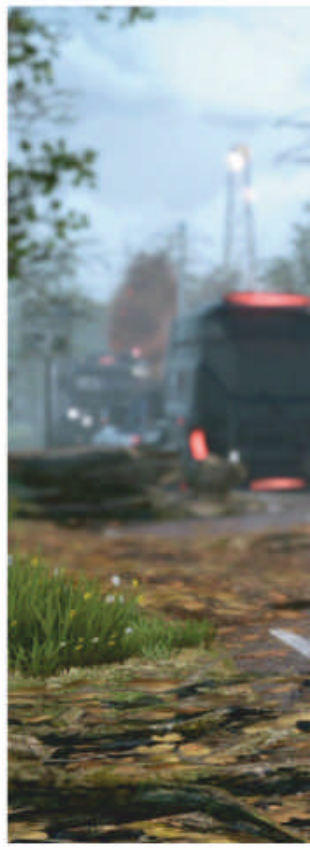
RELEASED 2018

Fraser: You can kill someone with a homing suitcase.
Phil: You can! And it's the reason *Hitman 2* is one of the most satisfying stealth games around. Look behind the thematic window dressing of a stoic assassin causing trouble in a series of neighbourhoods and you'll realise that *Hitman 2* is a procession of puzzle boxes built on rigidly consistent rules. It's a rare and beautiful game where breaking your own sense of immersion makes for a more enjoyable experience.

14 DOOM ETERNAL

RELEASED 2020

Wes: *Eternal* spikes my adrenaline so hard I'm exhausted after an hour. If you've ever pondered the videogame equivalent of slamming a 16 oz Monster Energy, then juggling chainsaws while riding a unicycle across a burning rope suspended over a hellmouth, well, here you go.
Harry: *Doom Eternal*'s frantic relentlessness is often exactly what I'm looking for in a shooter. Juggling resources and living every second on the edge of death is a great way to unwind and few other games require quite the same undivided, hysterical concentration. While *Eternal* didn't change enough to give it the impact the 2016 reboot did, it didn't really need to. That intoxicating cocktail of hardcore metal, intricate map design and gruesomely cathartic glory kills is as exhilarating as ever, in necessarily short bursts.
James: *Doom 2016* is still great! Go play that if you want to breathe between headshots, if you want to remain fully conscious and aware while ripping up demons and sticking it to the man (the man is Hell). But *Eternal* is a vastly different experience. *Doom 2016* wants you to feel cool and sweat a bit. *Eternal* kept me in a lizard-brained panic, balanced between frenzy and despair, an FPS automaton of pure instinct for 15 damn hours.



13 KENTUCKY ROUTE ZERO

RELEASED 2020

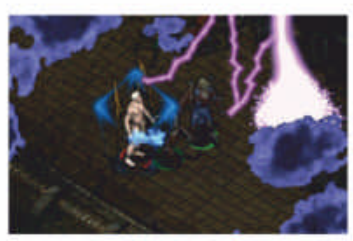
Rachel: Cardboard Computer took seven years to release all five episodes of *Kentucky Route Zero*, and it was still worth the wait. This evocative adventure about the struggles of rural America is more relevant today than ever. It's an anthology of stories from the road, tales of Americana lore intertwined with the truths of working class folk. Miners, electricians, and clerks take centre stage, telling stories of difficult survival during economic hardship. It's a powerful story that ultimately conjures a damning portrait of America.

12 XCOM 2

RELEASED 2016

Wes: This modern strategy classic sticks around year after year because it's such an endlessly flexible sandbox, but the Chosen, stars of its must-have expansion really make it for me. They're nasty, vengeful alien commandos who show up to make your life hell time and again. They made me miserable, but in return I tracked them to their hideouts and relished the chance to finish them off after so much torment. Evil's just more fun to fight when it has a face you can punch.

Robin: After the cautious defensiveness of the previous game, I love playing the sneaky aggressor in *XCOM 2* – no less vulnerable, but boldly forging my own destiny against the forces of oppression. And that atmosphere only adds to the pathos when a beloved soldier dies.



11 PLANESCAPE: TORMENT

RELEASED 1999

Jody: I first played Dungeons & Dragons in the 1990s. Even then *Planescape* was a wildly imaginative setting – a multiversal city run by squabbling philosophy gangs. *Torment* takes that world and emphasises its urban grottiness, with magic tattoos instead of platemail and charms made of flies. The heroes are scuffed-up too. There's a thief who's part-demon and voiced by Sheena Easton, a pyromancer with eternally burning skin, and you, an amnesiac corpseman.

10 TITANFALL 2

RELEASED 2016

Robin: The most creative shooter campaign in years, plus a wonderfully dramatic multiplayer offering. Now that it's finally on Steam, you've really got no excuse not to pick it up. If any game deserves a second life, it's this one.
Harry: I'll take Robin's word for it on the multiplayer, but the campaign is the best ever in a shooter, with more imagination in single levels than some entire games. The timeline-tearing Effect and Cause level is rightly eulogised, but the way the game is willing to bin excellent ideas like this, then follow it up with something better, is extraordinary. Like many, I only played it because of word-of-mouth, so here's the word from my mouth: play it.

9 OUTER WILDS

RELEASED 2019

Steven: Playing *Outer Wilds*, I felt a kind of childlike wonder at the cosmos that I haven't felt in a long time. Each planet that you can visit is a wonderful scientific enigma that slowly reveals a tragic and poignant story about our place in the universe. It's charming, endlessly inventive, and, despite a frustrating final puzzle, one of the most consistently incredible indie games I've ever played. While games like *Elite Dangerous* try to recreate the joy of discovery by emulating an entire galaxy, *Outer Wilds* packs it all into a single solar system trapped in a 20-minute time loop. Play this game.
Robin: So glad we pushed this higher. An absolutely exquisite game that everyone should try.

8 HOLLOW KNIGHT

RELEASED 2017

Rachel: Team Cherry's gloomy subterranean world is like no other. The craft in every inch of its bug civilisation is incredible – there are stories to find wherever you roam. It's a fantastically satisfying action-adventure to play through, but it was wanting to learn more about the tragic setting that kept me pushing ever forward.
James: *Hollow Knight* is still the best *Metroid* game. Nintendo, cancel the rest of your 2D *Metroid* plans, mainline that Prime stuff, because Team Cherry has it handled. No other 2D adventure has as much tucked away, a constant unfurling of scope, character and history.
Robin: Here's a hot take for you: I think this game does *Dark Souls* better than *Dark Souls* does.

7 DISHONORED 2

RELEASED 2016

Fraser: No game has levels like the ones found in *Dishonored 2*. Most of them would be the high point of an entire game anywhere else. When you reach the Clockwork Mansion, you think it's probably peaked, with its elaborate transforming rooms and terrifying mechanical constructs, but then a few missions later you hit A Crack in the Slab, letting you explore a mansion in both the past and present, altering the timeline to complete your mission. Picking apart their quirks and figuring out how to break the patterns of the guards requires a lot of lateral thinking, but thankfully you've usually got a lot of nifty tricks up your sleeve – at points you feel more like a trickster god than an assassin.

6 SEKIRO SHADOWS DIE TWICE

RELEASED 2019

Harry: This isn't just one of the finest, tightest, sharpest action games ever, it's also one of the best rhythm games you can play on PC. Imagining each flourish of an enemy sword as a node on an approaching fretboard is a useful way of parrying and dodging your way through the dark world of Sengoku-era Japan. As is customary from FromSoftware by now, the combat is note-perfect, too, making the punishingly rewarding learning curve feel as firm, fair, and utterly enthralling as ever.

Tom: FromSoftware can do no wrong at the moment. *Sekiro* features the best combat system the developer has made yet. The block-and-parry system produces fights that look as though they've been choreographed, and the boss battles are outstanding.

5 SLAY THE SPIRE

RELEASED 2019

Tyler: Still the best roguelike deckbuilder, despite a couple of challengers. You'll know you're hooked after the first time you spend a full minute deciding whether to click on a campfire or a shop.

Robin: In the years since its Early Access release, I don't think there's any game I've played as much as *Slay the Spire*. The decks you build as you play feel like intricate engines – and there's always some new configuration of parts to try.

Wes: Shout out to Electrodynamics, the card that turns my beloved android Defect into a lightning bolt-casting murder machine. It always makes me feel unstoppable, right up until the wrong boss fight ruins my night. But there's always time for another run, even if it's already turned three in the morning.

4 THE WITCHER III

RELEASED 2015

Robin: Such a spectacular, ambitious achievement of an RPG world that it really hasn't aged much at all. Still an absolute pleasure to explore, and still home to some of the best writing and characters the genre's ever seen. Finish the main game, and your reward is two expansions that are even better.

Andy K: For me, the magic of *The Witcher III* lies in its many side quests. When you pluck an innocuous-sounding bounty from a village notice board, you never really know what kind of wild story you're about to get yourself tangled up in. Almost every quest feels weighty and worthwhile, with memorable stories inspired by some of the very strangest cuts from the depths of Eastern European folklore.

3 RED DEAD REDEMPTION 2

RELEASED 2019

Chris: Easily my favourite game of 2019, checking off all the boxes on my internal wishlist: beautiful and incredibly detailed open world, lots of stuff to do but typically not much pressure to do any of it until I was ready, and believable characters I felt invested in. Many of the missions in the second half felt a bit samey, but since missions were spaced out over the 100 or so hours I played it didn't bother me much.

Andy K: Rockstar's evocative slice of the American West is the only open world that feels genuinely wild and natural to me. They really captured something about nature that seems to have eluded other studios, which makes for a setting that feels wonderfully *real* as you explore.

2 DIVINITY: ORIGINAL SIN 2

RELEASED 2017

Robin: I love that *Divinity: Original Sin II* applies the same sense of choice and freedom that you find in its sprawling, branching story to its systems-driven combat. Interweaving elemental effects – expanded hugely from the already ambitious first game – turn every fight into an exercise in controlled chaos.

Teleport that oil barrel onto an enemy's head to crack it open, then set it alight with a fire spell. Curse the fire to make it unextinguishable. Summon rain to create puddles across the battlefield, then a chill wind to freeze them – or electrify them with lightning. Then heat it back up to turn it into a line-of-sight blocking steam cloud to protect your back line, before your warrior leaps over to cause havoc.

Combat is its own sandbox, with endless opportunities to experiment and prove how clever you are – or for things to go spectacularly wrong in the most hilarious fashion. It doesn't feel like just something you do between conversations, or a way to show off your latest stat upgrade. It's a seamless continuation of the game's anarchic philosophy, and just a fantastically fun tactical challenge in its own right, too.

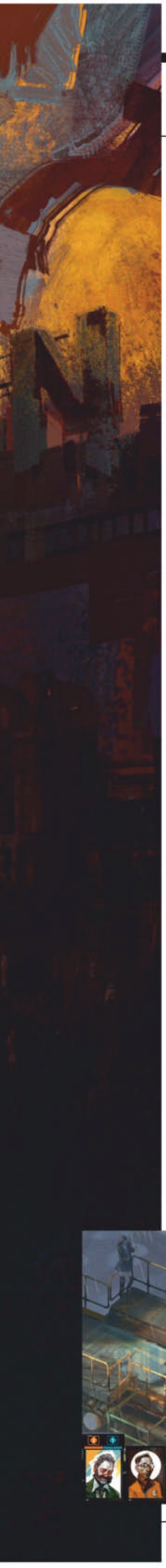
Fraser: I dig it so much that I've started a new game even though *Baldur's Gate III* is coming soon, at least to Early Access. And why not? Playing with different characters and builds means I get to experience all the best bits again from a different perspective. Now I'm a dickhead lizard who keeps demanding people make me some lunch. And I've got a new friend, a squirrel riding a cat skeleton, along with a bunch of other additions and official mods that have sprouted since its launch. It's still a brilliant, free-wheeling RPG, and sports one of the all-time best combat systems – and after a slew of updates it's currently the best it's ever been.

Jacob: That every single character in a 120+ hour RPG has been fully voiced by an actor should be proof enough that *Divinity: Original Sin II* is worth your time. The level of detail in this game, and the willingness to let the player enjoy it as they see fit, far surpasses anything else I've experienced.

Tyler: There's a sad quest about dogs that you can only do if you know how to speak to animals. You can rip off people's faces and wear them to disguise the fact that you're a skeleton. You can accidentally finish quests before an NPC explains them to you, just because you stumbled onto them. *Divinity: Original Sin II* feels much more like playing with a creative and clever DM than most modern RPGs, especially the sort that lays much of its choice in rude or nice dialogue options.

And as has been mentioned, the turn-based combat is great, in part just because it's turn-based, as it should be. (Sorry if you like it, but real-time-with-pause can bite me. I'm very thankful that Larian is developing *Baldur's Gate III*, because it means I might actually enjoy a *D&D* game for once.)

THE TOP 100



1

DISCO ELYSIUM

RELEASED 2019

Robin: I struggle to think of a game that has more radically changed how I think about a genre. *Disco Elysium* breaks down the RPG, turns it upside down, slaps it in the face, and then takes it to a bar to get hammered with it. Despite an old school isometric perspective, it couldn't be more willing to dump dry old tropes and mess with the ones it keeps, to the point that even much larger, more fully-featured RPGs seem oddly unambitious, and even stagnant, by comparison.

Jody: Of all the bold things *Disco Elysium* does, my favourite is that it says videogames can be political and all the better for it. It starts out cynical about politics and constantly points out the flaws of every ideology, including ideology-less centrism, but it builds from there to a point – that politics are messy and confusing but also necessary, that communities should take care of their own most vulnerable members, and that even when it hides behind labels like 'traditionalism' and 'nationalism', fascism can rise. It makes other RPGs, especially ones that try to present both sides of every argument, seem wishy-washy and cowardly.

Fraser: *Disco Elysium* lingers long after it's over. It poses a barrage of questions and constantly challenges with its themes of revolution, nationalism, morality – a kaleidoscope of ideologies all being presented before the game tears them down. Every character seems to have a manifesto, and the game itself almost serves as a manifesto for the future of RPGs, or at least ZA/UM's vision for it.

It rips out so many tired RPG cliches and swaps world-shattering stakes for an introspective exploration of a man utterly failing to hold it together. It grabs the genre by the shoulders and shouts, "You don't need elves or fights or scenery-chewing villains!" And even when it uses conventional stuff like skill checks, it reinvents the whole system. Skills have personalities. They talk to you. They tell you secrets about the city or offer insights into crime scenes.

Playing other RPGs, I just keep thinking about *Disco Elysium*. It makes most of them seem cautious and set in their ways, and the constant recycling of systems that have, in some cases, barely changed in decades seems less forgivable now that there's this much more appealing alternative available.

Andy K: I knew *Disco Elysium* was special from pretty much the moment I started playing it for our review – but I didn't bank on it permanently altering my expectations for an entire genre. The freedom you have to shape the protagonist, through the things you say and do, is quite extraordinary. He's a gross, wet ball of clay, and by the end of the game it really does feel like you've moulded him into something distinctly yours. I'm also amazed whenever I play how developer ZA/UM seems to constantly be two steps ahead of me, with some kind of reward or pay-off, even if it's a small one, for any harebrained idea I happen to dream up. The only really bad thing I have to say about *Disco Elysium* is that it's ruined all other RPGs for me. If only all the others were this improbably deep.

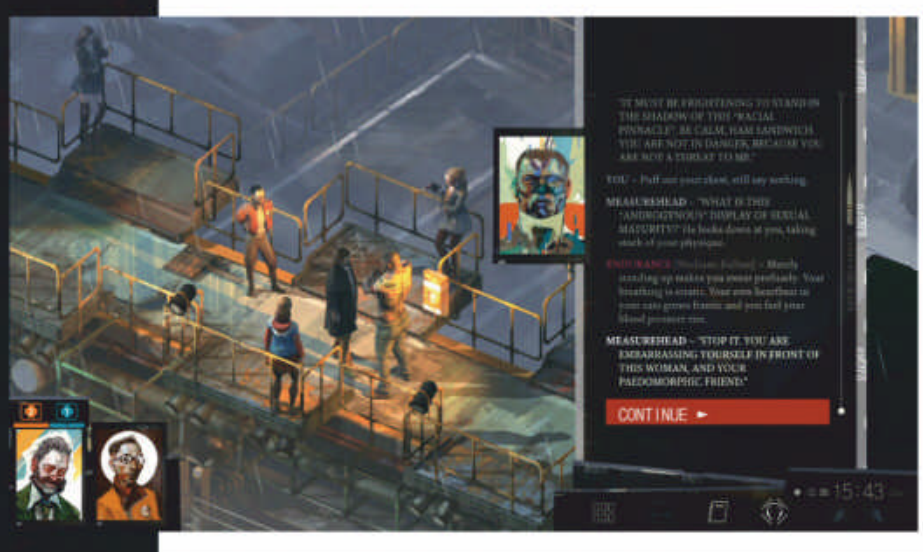
Jacob: If I asked you to describe the worst hangover you've ever experienced, it wouldn't hold a candle to the one you have to live out in *Disco Elysium*.

Wes: The writing! I want to bathe in these words. There's a joyous reverence shimmering off every sentence in *Disco Elysium*. It feels so alive with its mission to prove that words alone can make a masterpiece. Turns out they can.

THERE'S A JOYOUS REVERENCE SHIMMERING OFF EVERY SENTENCE.

Plenty of RPGs have great writing. *Disco Elysium* goes out of its way, though, to truly elevate its text. Tremendous care went into the presentation – the font, the way text unfurls, the visual effects when you pass or fail a skill check – to keep you glued to these words. *Disco Elysium* turns traditional RPG skills into luscious conversations, with each voice in your head adding colour, clarity and humour to a scene far more effectively than graphics could. It's a thousand times more interesting and creative than a companion in a BioWare-style RPG chiming in with an opinion on your latest binary decision.

I love games that truly feel like they were made by individual human beings, and it's staggering that every word, in a game of this scope, can feel so personal.



NO DECISION IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT MATTERS MORE THAN YOUR RACE AND CLASS.

EVERY CHARACTER, FROM HARDCORE RAIDERS TO THAT LEVEL 14 UNDEAD WARLOCK YOU STARTED SIX YEARS AGO ON A WHIM BUT NEVER TOUCHED AGAIN, IS DEFINED BY THESE TWO TRAITS. AND FEW OF THE CHOICES YOU MAKE IN THE COUNTLESS HOURS THAT UNFOLD AFTER STARTING A NEW ADVENTURE ARE EVER AS MEANINGFUL.

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: SHADOWLANDS IS GOING TO CHANGE THAT.

By Steven Messner

CHOICE & CONSEQUENCE

When it launches later this year, *Shadowlands* will take players on a journey to the afterlife in order to save the world of the living. And at the end of that initial story campaign, players will have to make the most difficult choice they've faced since the character selection screen. But *Shadowlands* is more than a chance to inject some much-needed feeling of consequence back into your adventure. It's also an opportunity for Blizzard to tear the veil off an entirely new part of the *Warcraft* universe – one that wasn't spelled out in game manuals, tie-in novels, or lore bibles decades ago.

"Many of our past expansions had a clear anchor in some large established villain, piece of lore, a place in the world," game director Ion Hazzikostas tells me. "There were reams of novels that have been written or past references in games like *Warcraft III* or otherwise. But *Shadowlands* really started from almost a footnote, frankly. It's a world created largely whole cloth from the imaginations of our artists and our narrative designers."

THE OTHER SIDE

To understand what's happening in the Shadowlands, players must be familiar with what happened during the climax of the current expansion, *Battle for Azeroth*. After being ousted from her position as Horde Warchief, the undead banshee queen Sylvanas Nightrunner flees to the frigid continent of Northrend. It's here that she battles the new Lich King, Bolvar, for his Helm of Domination that Arthas once used to rule the undead Scourge. Instead of wearing it herself, however, Slyvanas shatters it, tearing the veil between the living world and the Shadowlands – *Warcraft*'s version of an afterlife. Obviously that's not actually a good thing.

If you can believe it, the Shadowlands has it even worse. As lead narrative designer Steve Danuser explains, "The Shadowlands isn't just heaven or hell. It's an entire realm made up of different microcosms – each one a unique slice of a different kind of afterlife. When a mortal soul dies, each is judged by a cosmic being known as the Arbiter who determines which area of the Shadowlands is most befitting of their deeds and thoughts. Of those, players will explore five main zones, four of which are ruled over by a different Covenant."

"For example, Bastion, the first zone we're going to go to, is home to the Kyrian Covenant and these are bright, angelic spirits and they are the ones who ferry souls to the afterlife," Hazzikostas says. "On the other end of the spectrum are the Necrolords of Maldraxxus, the military might of the Shadowlands. When the Shadowlands wage war against other powers in the cosmos, that's where those forces come from."

TOP: Ardenweald gives me big The Dark Crystal vibes.

Below: Torghast is big. Like, really big.

EVERY SOUL THAT ENTERS THE SHADOWLANDS GETS AN EXPRESS PASS STRAIGHT TO THE WORST OF ITS HELLS

"All of those are beings that are of death in the same way that a demon is of disorder or fell, or a fire elemental is of fire," Danuser explains. "These are magical creatures, and we get to explore the rules and the groundwork for this new kind of cosmic influence."

That's how the Shadowlands should work, but thanks to Sylvanas and her new benefactor known as the Jailer, that delicate cycle is broken. Now, every soul that enters the Shadowlands gets an express pass straight to the worst of its hells: a fifth, nightmarish realm known as the Maw. Souls that are sent here are imprisoned and tortured forever, causing the rest of the Shadowlands to experience what's basically a cataclysmic drought.

As players work through the story campaign and gradually reach max level, they'll tour each of these zones, learning about each Covenant that exists there while also puzzling out how to restore balance and return the Shadowlands to its normal order and defeat Sylvanas and the Jailer. At the end of that first chapter, players will have to make an important, long-lasting choice to join a specific Covenant. Each one offers different powerful abilities, unique loot, and their own story quests to complete. It's a decision that will affect the next few years of your life in Azeroth, and it's one not to be taken lightly.

BLOOD PACTS

"*WoW* has relatively few things that feel like they constitute your identity," Hazzikostas says. "It's your class, your faction, your race, maybe what professions you pick – because those are pretty weighty and hard to change easily. We're looking to add another piece to that identity, which is an essential part of the MMORPG genre with an emphasis on the RPG part of it. It's the role that you're playing, the things that distinguish your character from all the others that you're sharing the space with, that add a lot of depth and texture both mechanically, but also in terms of the story you're experiencing. Covenants are all that."

Once you reach the new level cap, your Covenant will be the hub of all your endgame activities. Each one has a unique storyline that'll see you unearth the mysteries of the Shadowlands and take the fight to Sylvanas and the Jailer, but the real draw is the powers that each provide. Joining a Covenant unlocks »

CHOOSE WISELY

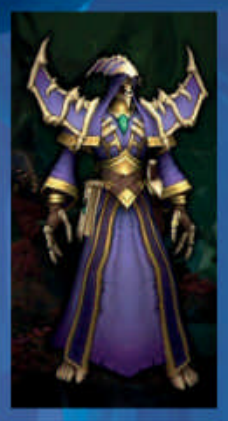
A quick overview of each Covenant and what they offer

KYRIAN OF BASTION

The Kyrian are the valkyries of the Shadowlands. They have owl butlers.

Signature ability: Summon Steward

Call up your own owl butler who offers you a refreshing beverage and can perform several services once per day like hunting for Legendary item materials.

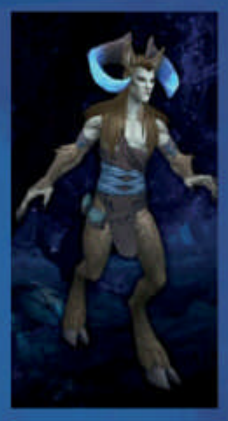


NECROLORDS OF MALDRAXXUS

The military might of the Shadowlands.

Signature ability: Fleshcraft

Form a shield of flesh and bone that protects you. Using the ability near corpses enhances Fleshcraft, making it capable of nullifying up to 50 percent of incoming damage.

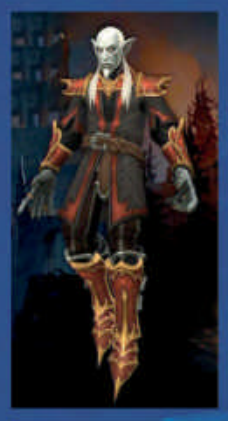


NIGHT FAE OF ARDENWEALD

The druids of the afterlife, the Night Fae oversee the cycle of life and death in the afterlife.

Signature ability: Soulshape

Turn into a spirit animal and teleport forward while also increasing your movement speed. You can reactivate the ability to teleport again.



VENTHYR OF REVENDRETH

The vampire-like Venthyr take in souls who are pretty evil but not irredeemable and help them become less of a dick.

Signature ability: Door of Shadows

Choose a location up to 30 yards away and then step through an ethereal doorway to teleport to that location.

RIGHT: Who doesn't want their own personal owl butler?

two new abilities: one signature ability that is universal to all players in that Covenant, and a second that is based on your chosen class.

Signing up with the vampire-esque Venthyr of Revendreth, for example, earns you the Door of Shadows, which opens a ghastly portal that you can step through to teleport yourself 30 yards away. The Night Fae of Ardenweald, however, offers you the Soulshape ability, which turns you into an agile fox that can zip through any environment.

These signature abilities have caused hot debate in the community, with players worrying that some might feel punished for making a decision that isn't considered the most optimal. Door of Shadows, for example, could theoretically be used to skip a combat encounter in a dungeon entirely – but if you decided to join up with the Kyrian instead and can't use it, players might not want to play with you. "That is a very legitimate, real concern," Hazzikostas says.

FEAR AND FEEDBACK

Covenant abilities have become the defining discussion of *Shadowlands*' beta test, but Hazzikostas is hoping that as more features are added in preparation for launch, the choice of Covenant will become more nuanced and complex than merely enlisting with whichever one has the best ability as decided by the meta.

Covenants not only offer unique armour sets and cosmetic upgrades, but they also have an individualised system called Soul Binds. It's a bit complex, but in essence Soul Binds are a skill tree that represents your relationship to a notable character within your Covenant. As your relationship improves, you choose between new passive abilities on the skill tree – and there's even slots where you can socket gems that have their own abilities too. Each Covenant has three unique Soul Binds skill trees to unlock and level up, offering a ton of character customisation. Now, *WoW* is starting to feel a lot more like an RPG.

At the same, Hazzikostas says the team is listening closely to what players are saying and making adjustments. Initially, joining a Covenant seemed like a permanent decision, but recently systems have been implemented on the beta servers to allow players to switch – though that decision will carry consequences that make it impossible to jump from Covenant to Covenant as you please. Hazzikostas says a lot of it also factors down to balance, too.

"We've had these powers largely playable [in the beta] so we can start getting feedback on them, giving us time to iterate to basically solve the balance problem and make sure that if we're hearing that there's one clear outlier on the high end, we can rein that in," Hazzikostas explains. "If there's some power that feels like it's useless, we can redesign it or buff it significantly, and try to learn from some of the mistakes, frankly, that we made in a couple of our past efforts like some systems in *Battle for Azeroth* that didn't get enough early attention to let us really tune them."

DEAD STRAIGHT

Lessons learned from past mistakes like that can be found everywhere in *Shadowlands*. *Battle for Azeroth*, for example, tried to tell an intricate, multi-faceted story that changed depending on which faction you belonged to, with an overarching plot about Old Gods woven in between. In addition to zone stories that were disconnected from one another so that players could tackle them in any order, it made *Battle for Azeroth*'s narrative jumbled and incoherent.

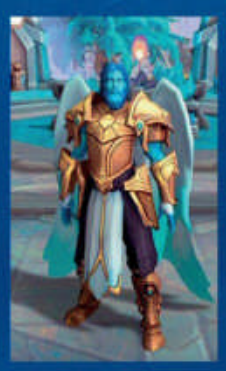
Shadowlands changes all of that. This time around, the storytelling is linear, and your quest to save the Shadowlands moves you through each zone in a specific order so there's better pacing and narrative cohesion – but that only happens on your first character. After that, you can tackle zones in whichever order so that levelling alternate characters has a bit of variety to it. "That was one of the lessons we learned as we were talking about going to *Shadowlands*," Danuser explains. "We wanted to tell a more focused and straightforward story."

Other ideas that failed to catch on in previous expansions, like *Legion*'s ultra-powerful Legendary items and *Battle for Azeroth*'s Island Expeditions have also been iterated on and have been transformed into entirely new systems. It makes *Shadowlands* feel like an expansion where years of experimenting and reimagining the tried and true MMO tropes could really pay off.

In *Legion*, for example, players often hated Legendaries because they were earned entirely through random drops. You could kill a beach crab and find it was holding an ancient and all-powerful piece of loot – or even worse, it was holding a Legendary item that was virtually useless for your character. Players hated that

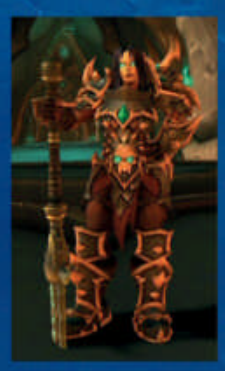
MISSED CONNECTIONS

Characters who died in* Warcraft's *long history turn up again. Here's just a few



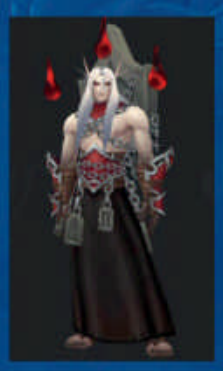
UTHER LIGHTBRINGER

Perhaps the most famous Paladin in *Warcraft* history, Uther was Arthas' mentor before he betrayed him and cut him down. That probably still bugs him a lot.



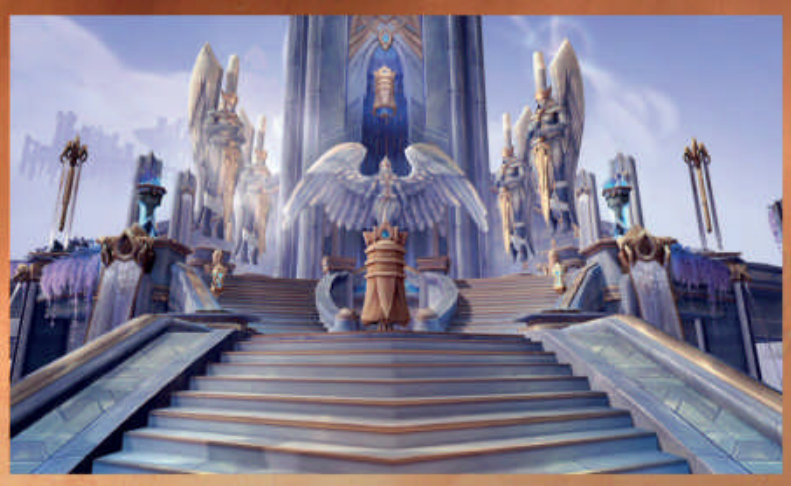
DRAKA

Though she never appeared in the game, Thrall's mom is a big deal – she's the mother of the most famous Horde warchief! Maybe she has some baby photos she can show us.



KAEL'THAS SUNSTRIDER

Used to be the leader of the Blood Elves before he turned all evil on everyone. Now he's spending an eternity with the Venthyr practicing mindfulness...



TOP: The entire zone of Revendreth is actually just the remains of a gothic castle.

ABOVE: The Kyrians sure know how to make a good first impression.

kind of randomness. In *Shadowlands*, however, Legendaries aren't randomly awarded but earned by tracking down specific recipes and taking them to a special crafter who will make them for you. It's a deterministic system that gives players total control over which Legendaries they want. The idea is that, over time, players will amass a collection of Legendaries that will suit different situations.

DIE, DIE AGAIN

Earning the resources required to craft a Legendary piece of gear, however, requires braving *Shadowlands*' biggest experiment yet: a procedurally-generated roguelike dungeon that changes each time you enter it. Called Torghast, Tower of the Damned, it's one of the central pillars of *Shadowlands*' endgame. After playing with it for hours in the beta, I can honestly say it's one of the most exciting new features ever added to *World of Warcraft*.

Torghast is a bit bizarre, though, if only because MMOs and roguelikes couldn't be more opposite in so many ways: one is about long-term persistence and a steady increase in power while the other is about wild power spikes, oppressive challenge, and the inevitability of dying, losing everything and starting over. That's exactly what senior game designer Paul Kubit finds most exciting about Torghast. "There's been a lot of challenges for us to marry the two concepts together," he says, "but we,

IT'S ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING FEATURES EVER ADDED TO WORLD OF WARCRAFT

as developers and gamers, enjoy playing them enough that we wanted to have one in our game too. It ended up working out great."

If you've played a roguelike before like *Dead Cells* or *The Binding of Isaac*, Torghast is exactly what you might imagine. Alone or with a party of five, players enter whichever two wings of Torghast are open that week and navigate through a procedurally generated dungeon, facing puzzles, monsters and boss fights that can change between each session. The higher you climb through the different floors, the tougher the fights become. And with six different wings that each have their own aesthetic, monsters, and bosses that rotate weekly, there's a whole lot of variability between runs.

The real fun of Torghast is its Anima Powers, though. As players explore, they'll periodically have to make a choice between one of several powers that can fundamentally change their character in exciting and often wild ways. The further you explore, the more these chosen powers begin to stack, creating sometimes hilarious combinations. As a Demon Hunter, for example, I found an Anima Power that extended my powerful demon form if I killed rats while it was active. I soon stumbled into a room that was full of rats, turning what should be a 15-second ability into something that lasted almost ten minutes. Just after that, I found an Anima Power that turned me into a giant too. By the time I got to the final room to fight the boss, I wasn't sure which of us was the real monster.

"That's something that we focused on a lot," Kubit says. "[Because] the powers that you get in Torghast are per run, we can make them super punchy. You can feel the impact of any power you get instantly. When you compare that to almost anything else in *WoW* – when you get a new weapon or something like that, you might go up by a couple of item levels, but unless you're paying attention to the numbers, you might not actually notice that effect. We can really, really focus on that here."

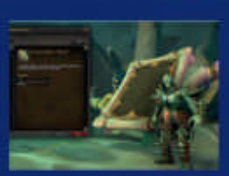
CHOOSE WISELY

Sixteen years after its launch, it's a bit surreal to be excited about another *World of Warcraft* expansion. It's a testament to how tenaciously Blizzard is tinkering and experimenting with the foundations of its MMO, forging onward even when those experiments fail and

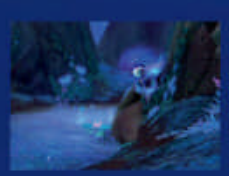
SIDE HUSTLE

Each Covenant also has a unique endgame activity that's like its own separate minigame. Here's how they work

PATH OF ASCENSION
KYRIAN
Play as a Kyrian champion with their own powers in a boss-rush mode to earn unique loot and upgrades.



ABOMINATION FACTORY
NECROLORDS
Love *Warcraft III*'s Abomination units? Make your own! Each one becomes a permanent part of the Necrolords.



QUEEN'S CONSERVATORY
NIGHT FAE
It's *Stardew Valley* except instead of crops you tend to soul seeds that blossom into spirits that give you loot.

THE EMBER COURT
VENTHYR
Vampires love a good party, so you get to throw one. Choose guests, entertainment, food, and more.

BLIZZARD IS PIVOTING TO FOCUS ON GIVING YOU MORE CONTROL OVER YOUR ADVENTURE

trusting that those lessons can inform better ideas in the future. It's exactly why, after players complained about the way randomness was infesting so many of *WoW*'s systems, Blizzard is pivoting to focus on giving you more control over your adventure. "It's come from listening to the community and it's evolving the game in a way which we think is more fun," Kubit says.

"Player agency is something that we've heard a lot in terms of desire from the community," Hazzikostas says. "But also, in reflecting on our own designs and on places where randomness went too far and made players feel like they didn't have control over working towards specific goals. Over shaping their characters into what they wanted them to be. It's something that we've been talking about internally a lot for the last couple of years, and that became a really defining pillar."

TOP LEFT: Maldraxxus sure looks like a friendly place to visit.

MAIN: Unkillable monsters called Terragrue's hunt you down if you die too much in Torghast.

That renewed investment in making choices matter along with more complicated progression systems like Soulbinds and Legendary item crafting makes *World of Warcraft* feel a lot more like an RPG in ways it often hasn't. It feels like both a return to what originally made *World of Warcraft* so captivating while also pushing onward into parts unknown. And Hazzikostas agrees. "It was a tremendous challenge," he says. "I think we knew it was going to be coming into this project, but having worked through it for the last couple of years, it's been all of that and more. *Shadowlands* is the most high concept, the most ambitious expansion we've ever undertaken."

Games

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

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SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 100 scale. The higher, the better – though 100 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 100 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 50 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

MYTHBUSTERS

It's not just the earthquakes shaking things up in A TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY. *By Fraser Brown*

The work never stops when you're trying to organise a holiday to Troy with a bunch of your Greek mates. I just want to smash some walls, but I've got soldiers freaking out about bad omens, centaurs that need feed, petulant deities setting fire to shit like bored pyromaniac teens, and people pestering me endlessly about bronze they really don't need. Get your own bronze, Achilles! *A Total War Saga: Troy* never lets up.

If you've read any of the Greek epics that serve as *Troy*'s inspiration, you'll know that everyone's a dick, especially the gods. Thanks to some divine meddling, this Orlando Bloom-looking arsehole runs off with Helen, the Spartan queen, and takes her back to the titular city, plunging the Aegean into a brutal war. *Troy* still lets you fight whomever you want, but everyone is ultimately gearing up for this big brawl between east and west.

The eight factions have their own epic quests, but victory only happens when you've destroyed your adversaries across the sea, something that will be a lot easier if you've wrangled your neighbours into a big alliance or swallowed them up. It's an all-encompassing conflict that leads to *Troy* being the most purposeful *Total War* that I've ever played. While you're getting ready for the big showdown, however, there are a whole lot of distractions.

GREEK SQUAD

Troy's shtick is that it's trying to present a more grounded version of mythology. There are minotaurs, centaurs, giants, and more, all of which can be fielded in battle – but really they're all humans. Giants are just big hairy dudes, while centaurs are simply warriors on horseback. There are gods, too, and while you won't see Poseidon swimming around, not showing them the proper respect will lead to disasters like earthquakes and fires. One of my generals got very sad when Aphrodite 'made' his wife cheat on him.

Resource wars give the early game a lot of momentum.

Appeasing the gods means killing loads of bulls in their name, cutting into your food stockpile. As well as keeping them happy, these sacrifices effectively level the gods up, giving you passive bonuses and even letting you recruit new units and agents. Trying to find the right balance and keeping as many gods as possible in your pocket is a tough juggling act, and it's easy to forget about them when you're embroiled in a war, but the extra layer of micromanagement is worth it for the specialisation options it opens up.

Food isn't the only resource that you need to worry about. There's wood, stone, bronze, and gold, all used to fund your building and recruitment efforts. The range of resources means that, even if you've got a deficit somewhere, you're probably still going to be able to build or recruit *something*, and it's a rare turn where there's nothing to do. These new resources also create targets, directing the flow of your conquest of the Aegean.

Resource wars give the early game a lot of momentum, but it doesn't last. I finished my first game around turn 100, but I barely had to think about my stores and larders after 40. There are just too many ways to get resources. Unfortunately, that won't stop other factions from constantly pestering you. There's yet to be a *Total War* where the AI won't spam you with requests, but here it's especially egregious. It doesn't matter if they've got a massive stockpile, they'll still come begging.

I'm not totally sure what to make of the AI. On the campaign map, enemies can be the most competent opponents one minute, only for them to spend the next ten turns aimlessly sailing around the Aegean not actually doing anything. This was especially noticeable when I went to war with the Amazons.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A mythological *Total War*

DEVELOPER
Creative Assembly Sofia

PUBLISHER
Sega

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes (but not until November)

LINK
totalwar.com/games/troy

THE HERO'S JOURNEY
One does not simply walk into Troy
Helen is kidnapped by Paris
Everyone starts picking a side
But very slowly
A few more turns yet
You're going to have to get forceful now
Everyone's requesting bronze
Time to travel to Troy
More requests for bronze
Hang out and wait for an earthquake
Wait that actually worked?
Conquer Troy
Helen is in another castle

TROY FRIENDS

Once you've become a big strategic threat, you're assigned an antagonist. Just like real life! This is another powerful faction that's got some grudges against you, and the only way to win the conflict is through outright annihilation. It's a neat feature that leans into the most aggressive parts of *Total War*, and it means there's a bit more to the conflict than just conquering or defending Troy. The Amazons, unfortunately, never even made it to Greece. The war went on for many turns, but despite being told that they were poised to start sacking all my undefended settlements, they seemed happy to potter around in the sea.

In the real-time fights, the AI seems to have a better handle on things. Armies are less committed to

Aside from battering rams, you'll have no siege engines for most of the game.

Poor Helen is effectively a trophy that everyone is trying to capture.

It's impressive that nobody ever trips up during these charges.

Typical heroes, showing off in front of their troops.

The war kicked off because Orlando Bloom kidnapped a mime.

their strategies and can quickly adapt, leading to battles that have a much more exciting flow. Aside from chariots and special mythological units like the centaur, there's no cavalry in *Troy*. It's all about infantry this time, but the roster is just as diverse. It does mean that veteran players will need to drop some old notions, however, like spearmen being defensive units that protect your army against cavalry attacks. One of the first spearmen units you'll recruit is actually a fast, mobile charging unit that you'll want to rush in with and then pull out quickly – not unlike cavalry. For a *Total War* game, that feels a bit counter-intuitive, so expect some cock-ups before you get used to them.

As well as having roles like charger and defender, units are split up into different weight classes, determining their speed and how they deal with some of the new terrain features. Light units can outrun heavier ones, sprint through mud without getting stuck and get into the perfect position for a flanking attack, while heavy units can take more of a beating and sit comfortably in your front line. A small number of units can also switch from defensive to offensive roles by putting their shields away, increasing their damage output.

This all contributes to battles being more micromanagement intensive, but not to the point where controlling them is too fiddly. You just need to be ready to make adjustments and take advantage of your specialists, finding vulnerable enemy flanks or employing some stealth. Shame about the sieges, then, which just feel like slogs, especially since siege weapons have yet to be invented. I have to say I clicked auto resolve a lot. There's less room for *Troy*'s smart tactics, so they're just dull meat grinders.

Heroes unexpectedly make less of an impression than the rest of the roster, at least in the midst of battle. Leaders and generals have been toned down since *Three Kingdoms*, but otherwise they haven't been changed much. They're like Romance characters, but a bit shit. They have buffs and debuffs – mostly forgettable, apart from the very handy heals – can get into duels and are much tougher than your average warrior, but their impact on battles is considerably less dramatic and they simply aren't as much fun to command.

It's all about infantry this time, but the roster is just as diverse.

In the campaign, however, they're the driving force. Their obsession with Helen (who is just a passive stat boost that you can steal), thirst for vengeance and epic quests are all at the forefront, and Creative Assembly Sofia has used these legendary celebrities to define the factions. Achilles is quick to anger, which is reflected in his shit management skills; Paris and Hector both compete for their father's attention, hoping to lead Troy; Odysseus and his warriors are sneaky and cunning ambushers – but really *Three Kingdoms* still did it a whole lot better. Gone is the web of relationships and nuanced personal diplomacy, replaced instead by characters who have plenty of unique traits, sure, but not nearly as much personality.

Troy's maps are a high point, both aesthetically and tactically. They're bright, fantastical things and are evocative of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*'s impossibly beautiful vistas, and they're full of quirks. Chokepoints, cover, varied elevations and lots of places to hide – more than ever before, terrain feels like both an adversary and an ally. It's unfortunate, though, that mud, sand and tall grass feature so infrequently. They were touted as important new additions, but I hardly fought any battles where there was an opportunity to take advantage of them. The most common is tall grass, but since that just serves a similar function to trees, its impact isn't actually all that noticeable.

Out of battle, the map of the Aegean is even more stunning. It's map porn, squeezing as much visual flair out of the setting as possible. The skybox and distant mountains are even rendered in black figure pottery. I just wish it wasn't full of agents constantly trying to assassinate people and perform religious rituals. Yes, they're back, and yes, they're still a pain in the arse. Spies, seers, priests, envoys, even some one-shot epic agents – there are too many of them, and few of their abilities couldn't be given to generals or off-screen followers. The map's busy enough without them.

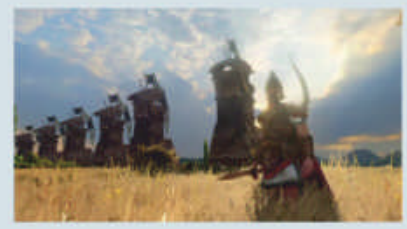
Generally, though, the busyness is part of the appeal. Trying to bring all your neighbours together for a big war, managing the petulant gods and building up a massive war chest is engaging stuff. It's only once you've become really established that the economy and diplomacy becomes largely superfluous, and then the cracks start to appear. And even then, it never completely falls apart.

This *Total War* experiment, then, is more of a success than *Thrones of Britannia*, and I pray the tactical shake-up won't be forgotten when cavalry inevitably reappears with the next game. But now that I'm done with this review, I'm already planning to head back to *Warhammer II* and *Three Kingdoms* instead of starting another Aegean war. Sorry, *Troy*. ■

HORSING AROUND *There's no Trojan Horse, but here are some alternatives*

POSEIDON
Of all the gods in *Troy*, Poseidon is the most irate. He's got a beef with the Trojans, so he's got a penchant for causing earthquakes that make it much easier to besiege the city.

A BIG BOAT
Closest to the myth, this method lets you cram units into a horse-headed boat, gift it to the Trojans, and then surprise them at night by throwing them a big, bloody party.



TOWERS
Sieges in *Troy* are usually very low-tech, but for the siege of Troy itself you'll be able to use these towers to get over the walls. And they look a wee bit like horses.

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

Refreshing tactical changes and some of the best maps in the series make this an experiment worth checking out.

75

DETHRONED

CRUSADER KINGS III is in charge now.

By Fraser Brown

I've become completely tangled up in *Crusader Kings III*'s plots and family trees. It's my jailer, keeping me far too busy orchestrating murders and becoming pen pals with the King of France to leave the flat. I should probably do something about that, but I've got this succession crisis to sort out. You know how it is.

There never feels like a good time to step away from Paradox's grand strategy RPG. It's One More Crisis Syndrome and I've got it bad. Anyone who's played *Crusader Kings II* should be familiar with the ailment and well-prepared for the sequel. Once again, you're the head of an early medieval dynasty, and you'll try to keep it trucking for as long as you can by click, click, clicking on an elaborate map and a big stack of menus. Your tools are diplomacy, intrigue, warfare, and luck, and your goals are whatever whims your mind conjures up.

Like all grand strategy games, it's cursed to look incredibly imposing, but this is the friendliest of the bunch. It's shed none of its complexity, but it's much better at showing how everything is connected. On top of a serviceable tutorial that gets you started in Ireland, there's an encyclopaedia and a seemingly infinite supply of tooltips. Even the tooltips have tooltips. Getting advice is like stepping through a portal into a dimension constructed purely out of tips on how to lead a medieval dynasty, which turns out to be quite helpful.

Your tools are diplomacy, intrigue, warfare, and luck.

Don't get too hung up on that stuff, though. You can obsess over numbers and powergame your way through history, or you can go on an experimental journey to create a matriarchal society in North Africa founded by Vikings, but you don't need epic ambitions to get the most out of *Crusader Kings III*; all you need is a dysfunctional family.

KING'S QUEST

Imagine *The Sims*, but you've got 20 people in your house, half of them have virulent STDs, and the others are plotting a coup. It's a glorious mess. Your dynasty doesn't exist in a vacuum, either, and will constantly collide with other families and courts, but you can burn through plenty of hours just mucking around with your domestic affairs and securing your grip over your realm.

Crusader Kings has always been about characters instead of nations, but they've never seemed so rich and so maddeningly real before. Each of them is full of agency and ambitions and will more often than not act out when they don't get their way. They might be greedy, cruel, pious, horny, perpetually drunk – if you're looking for an adjective, you'll find it. Everything has a root cause, something that the trait can be traced back to, like a childhood bully or a battle that went badly, creating characters moulded by their pasts.

They start developing before they're even born. Parents can pass on congenital traits to their children that can be strengthened over generations, letting you promote things like intelligence and symmetrical features through arranged marriages and bad science. Inbreeding is one way this can be done – a perfectly normal thing to write in a videogame review – but that's a ticking time bomb. One of my rival dynasties ended up almost destroying itself by keeping it all in the family, which made a whole generation almost entirely infertile. Big Game of Thrones fans.

A long-lived character will accumulate a wide assortment of traits over their life, some of them slightly contradictory, but there are always a couple of reliable core personality quirks that bubble to the surface. Everyone gets an epithet that sums them up, too, so you don't have to trawl through their character sheet to get the measure of them. I'd be Fraser the Tired Critic.

These come in extremely handy when you're setting up marriages or considering someone for a job on your council. You don't want your

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A grand strategy RPG driven by messy nobles and constant drama

DEVELOPER
Paradox Interactive

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
GTX 1080Ti, Intel i7-8086K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
crusaderkings.com

FAMILY MATTERS *Great starting points for your first dynasty*

IRELAND
Playing in Ireland became the unofficial way to start *Crusader Kings II*, and now it's enshrined as a proper tutorial. Even returning players should consider trying someone like the Duke of Munster in 867, even if they skip the tutorial bits. It's a good place to expand in peace for a while.

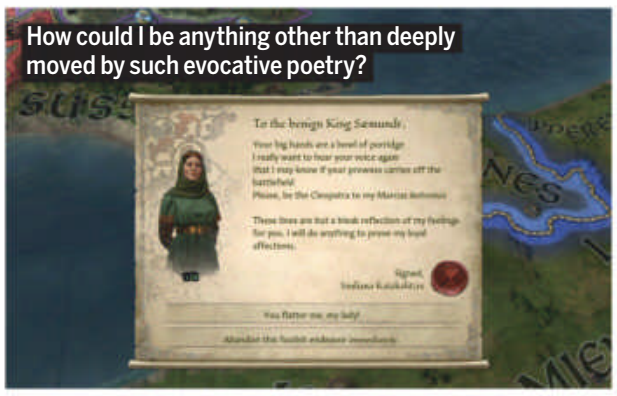
DARFUR
The Chiefdoms around Darfur control a strip that goes across Africa, with only impassable terrain to the north and south. On both sides are lots of independent realms with different religions and cultures, and that means opportunities. Maybe you can pick them off, or you can try to unite them.

HOLY ROMAN EMPIRE
You haven't lived until you've tried to get stuck into the scrum that is the Holy Roman Empire. Don't go for the Emperor straight away; pick a peripheral duke instead and sneak or sweet talk your way into power. This is where you can really use the intrigue system.

VIKINGS
Vikings always have more fun than everyone else, especially Jarl Haesteinn. He's rich, starts with a couple of big personal armies and has superhuman combat skills. Leave Brittany behind and set up shop somewhere full of plump targets. Africa's fun, or you could try Italy.

What I wouldn't do to cover up that tiny bit of table.

Family portraits are always a bit awkward.


To the benign King Sæmund,
Your big hands are a bowl of porridge
I really want to hear your voice again
Please, be the Cleopatra to my Marcus Antonius
You flatter me, my lady!

How could I be anything other than deeply moved by such evocative poetry?

Children are by far *Crusader Kings III*'s creepiest characters.

marshal to be an irrational craven – unless you think it'll be a laugh – and a marriage with a resentful villain probably won't be a very happy one.

Sometimes they seem almost bespoke. All their stories are random, emergent narratives, but then you get these arcs that just seem too perfect. There are characters who go on these journeys taking them from nobodies to kings, full of surprise twists, heroic comebacks, secret romances – the lot of it. In that way *Crusader Kings III* doesn't really need us at all.

To really make a mark on the world, as well as keeping your unruly dynasty in check, you first need to focus on beefing up your ruler and hitting some personal milestones. Thankfully, there's always one event or another hurtling towards you with opportunities for growth. You might walk into your bedroom one night and find a member of your court molesting one of your shoes, at which point you can chase them out or call the guards, but you might instead decide that, actually, fondling random objects is very much your kind of thing. And voila, you've got a new hobby. More wholesome events include having a really nice conversation with a new friend and getting a really cool dog.

The price of free will is the constant threat of an existential crisis.

LIVE IT UP

Lifestyles let you chisel away at your rulers without having to rely on random events. They're like classes, each representing one of the game's skills. Through their education, everyone has an inclination for a specific lifestyle, but you can pick whichever one you want. Each lifestyle is split up into areas you can focus on, giving you a persistent passive bonus and letting you start to earn XP that can be used to unlock perks from the lifestyle's three trees. Where its predecessor took a lot of inspiration from RPGs, this is a full RPG progression system that's fuelled by stories rather than kills and quests.

The intrigue lifestyle is what I've found myself gravitating towards the most. It gives you a leg up in the murky world of secrets, schemes and hooks, and well as spawning events that let you explore your shady side. I often start with good intentions, but it never takes long before I'm spinning my web. Or at least trying to. On more than one occasion, I've realised too late that I was really the fly.

The lovely Mediterranean powerhouse I'd spent a lifetime building ended up ruined when my big mouth of a brother outed me for killing our other, stupider brother. I did the deed, I'll admit it. I sent my spymaster to dig around for secrets I could use as hooks to make people do my bidding. I seduced my brother's vassal and bribed one of his knights to join me in the plot. And when he was dead, I used the secrets I'd gathered to force my cowed nobles into making shitty deals and giving me more cash. So when my surviving brother found out about the deed, he tried to blackmail me and, failing that, told everyone. All my vassals with their bruised egos rose up against me, naturally and I met a very nasty end. That's what I get for dragging my 70-year-old ass into the battle.

BEST STRESSED

The most insidious threat to a ruler is stress. It's what keeps you honest. Or cruel. Or greedy. You gain stress whenever you act against your personality. If you're chaste and you start rolling around in the hay with a courtier, you're going to be wracked with guilt. It's sneaky. It got me once just because I thought about my deceased best friend. Boom – I'm feeling stressed. I hit the bottle to push down those feelings, and then I kept hitting the bottle until I looked like gammon. And then I died, again.

Sometimes I'd talk myself into taking a stress hit – it's just poisoning one guy, it's fine, just do it – but it quickly ramps up. There are so many ways that it can kill you, or at the very least make you a completely ineffective leader, so the prospect of getting stressed in a game made me extremely stressed in real life. It's awesome. There's more weight to these choices, more risk, and the price of free will is the constant threat of an existential crisis.

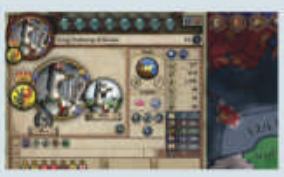
I've always had a problem with RPGs letting you make completely out-of-character choices without any real consequences. You can play Commander Shepard as a paragon of virtue and then turn around and be like, "I'm super xenophobic now, guys" and nobody thinks that's weird. It's fine. Here's some red karma. *Crusader Kings III* will kill your hypocritical ass if you try that shit.

While you can spend incalculable hours wrapped up in roleplaying and intrigue, there's a huge simulated world to paint in your colour. It's a sprawling, kaleidoscopic map that stretches from Iceland to Nigeria to Tibet, and what were often tiny bits of land with few identifying features in *Crusader Kings II* are now large regions with their own character.

Diverse terrain, geographical quirks and special buildings set these areas apart and make some of them very tempting prizes for would-be conquerors, as well as unique challenges. Maybe the fortress you're besieging has monumentally tough walls, or the terrain might put your units at a major disadvantage. The expanded map also means more tactical wrinkles that make fights less of a pure numbers game.

OK, a lot of the time it does just come down to who has the most people willing to die for them. And you'll usually need to chase them and fight them again until they're

DLC DREAMS *We need add-ons to fill some obvious gaps*

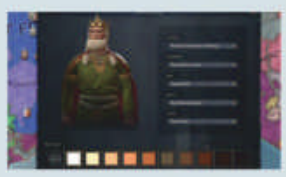


ANIMAL KINGDOM

A hidden mode in *Crusader Kings II* lets you play in a world full of intelligent animals. It's amazing. Want to date a dragon? Go ahead. This obviously needs to be a priority for *III*.

CRUSADER KINGS: BATTLE ROYALE

All games will inevitably feature a battle royale mode, so Paradox might as well give in now. One hundred players. A shrinking map. Start fabricating those claims.



CRUSADER BLING

You can dress your rulers up and give them haircuts, but there's so much more that could be added. Toss in some brooches, more hats, sceptres, maybe a bird that sits on your shoulder.

HOME VISIT

Microsoft Flight Simulator lets me fly right to my flat, but that's currently beyond the capabilities of *Crusader Kings III*'s, unable as it is to get updates from Bing maps. Fix this!

completely wiped out. It's still *Crusader Kings*. There are more opportunities to get an edge, though, like using knights and more high quality, specialised troops. Knights are like regular members of your court who want titles and legacies and a litany of other things, but they're also brilliant warriors who will wade into battle alongside the army's commander and slice their way through the peasant levies. They're badasses, but as they grow more influential they'll have greater expectations, so your greatest knight could also become your greatest rival.

There are other ways to conquer the world that don't come with the responsibility of managing an empire that spans continents. You can expand your dynasty to every corner of the map without gobbling up every county, using marriage and inheritances to place your relatives in seats of power outside your realm. Powerful members of your dynasty may also form a cadet branch, getting out from under your influence and gaining control over the family members in this new house.

DYNASTY WARRIORS

You're not sacrificing power; you're dividing responsibility. Other houses and independent rulers contribute renown to the dynasty, and as the head that means you're able to throw your weight around and spend that renown on dynasty-wide legacies – think perks, but they're permanent and for the whole family. Eventually you can build a dynasty of warlords or ensure that all the realms under your dynasty's supervision run with machine-like efficiency.

It has been a huge relief to let some other characters do some of the heavy lifting. Leading a dynasty to immortality is exhausting, but now it's a team effort. There are loads of different ways to play *Crusader Kings III*, but it's best when you've got a small or medium realm to worry about, with enough characters so that you've always got some drama, but not so many that your court is filled with strangers. Spreading your dynasty lets you enjoy the hit of power and rush of expansion but doesn't ditch you with a whole host of new administrative problems.

The loftiest ambition, of course, is to make everyone agree your god is the best one, or you could get in on the medieval era's biggest craze: heresy! Yes, if you're bored of

BAD RELIGION

Using* Crusader Kings III *to build a perfect faith for 2020

SACRED LIES
This tenet makes deceit a blessed art form – snake oil salesmen are considered pious and honesty is forbidden. Time for holy fake news.

HEDONISM
Party like the world is coming to an end with the Hedonism tenet. With gluttony now a virtue, you can get down with your grossest self.

PASTORAL ISOLATION
Maybe you just want to be left alone in a field. Perfectly fine. Everything is shit, so let's just hang out by this tree.

RITUAL CANNIBALISM
Why else would God make us so damn tasty, huh? This is the only logical endpoint for our current trajectory, I reckon.

Catholicism or another religion, you can just make your own faith. This can cause a lot of instability, piss off the dominant faith and requires a lifetime devoted to piety to pull off, but it's entirely worth it.

Religion in *Crusader Kings III* is vastly influential and usually chock full of rules that ruin everyone's fun. They're strict and way too interested in what people do in their own bedrooms. Your new faith can get rid of all that. Faiths are built out of tenets, traditions that come with special mechanics, and doctrines that determine the legality of things like same-sex relationships, who can become a priest and if divorce is OK. There are 14 doctrines that you have to settle, a trio of tenets to choose from a massive list, and then you've got to decide what traits are virtuous or sinful. You might as well make yourself head of the faith while you're at it, but if you'd rather work behind the scenes you can let others enjoy the majestic glory.

Making a new faith is a lot like creating a new culture, but there's also a discrete culture system that's tied to innovations. New laws, unique units and special bonuses can be unlocked over time for everyone in the culture, but only the dominant ruler can actually pick what innovations to focus on. Even research becomes another source of competition and intrigue and you try to keep your fellow rulers behind you. Just as new faiths keep popping up, new cultures can also appear and start challenging their more established neighbours.

Crusader Kings III is always in motion, always jumping to new stories, so it never lets you get too settled. But it also never ventures far out of its comfort zone. Paradox hasn't taken it in a different direction or made changes that will elicit any gasps. The stuff that made *Crusader Kings II* so enduring has been pushed to the front even more, while some of the bloat that accumulated over the better part of a decade has been chipped away. It's a very sensible sequel.

It spits out a constant stream of compelling alt-histories.

I know, I know – 'sensible' is not the most encouraging of words. Let me reassure you, then, that *Crusader Kings III* is incredible. It's an irrepressible story engine that spits out a constant stream of compelling alt-histories, delightfully infuriating characters, and social puzzles that I've become obsessed with. I can't imagine being done with it. I just subsist on digital drama now. Will Alfred finally leave the torture chamber and make a friend? What's Bjorn going to do now he knows his wife is in love with his chancellor? And who's going to be committing patricide next? I need to spend less time writing reviews and more time with my dynasties. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

With so much going on and different ways to play, *Crusader Kings III* is a triumph. The king is dead, long live the king!

94

LIFEBOAT

SPIRITFARER is a compassionate adventure that finds comfort in death. ***By Rachel Watts***

The creative director of *Spiritfarer*, Nicholas Guérin, was at Ubisoft before he joined Thunder Lotus Games. During his time there, he worked on the *Assassin's Creed* series, creating scenarios that would let players stab people in the neck in acts of vengeful fun. Wanting to create something nicer, Guérin joined Thunder Lotus to develop a game that approached the topic of death with compassion. *Spiritfarer*, a life sim about dying, does just that.

You play as Stella, an upbeat ferry master who's responsible for finding and helping wandering spirits pass on into the afterlife. After inviting the spirits to stay on your boat, you take care of them and make sure they live comfortably. Then, when they decide they're ready to move on, you take them to a huge, ominous portal called the Everdoor and see their journey through to the end. Sometimes the goodbyes are easy but, more often than not, they are bittersweet farewells to characters you've grown to love.

You're tasked with crafting a personal space for each resident, preparing their preferred foods, and keeping them happy with plenty of hugs. Very much in keeping with the life sim formula, you'll need to complete little tasks at all the boat's different stations – cooking, crafting, farming, weaving, smelting, etc.

Running around your boat to different stations, especially when you upgrade your boat a couple of sizes, is always a frenzied platforming spree of spinning, jumping, and gliding. Each station has a mini-game to keep things fun, like timing your weaving to make sure the needle lands on the target, or keeping the temperature in between two dials when you're smelting. For a mostly peaceful game, there's always a flurry of activity.

Thunder Lotus always wanted *Spiritfarer* to be a death-positive game.

Knowing that the majestic deer Gwen loves a black coffee, I plant the coffee bean seeds, water them until they're ready to harvest, and then take the beans to the kitchen to make one damn fine cup of joe. She's happy, I'm happy, and I think maybe this game won't make me cry after all? I'm very much mistaken.

It's because of these daily tasks that you get to know the characters closely in such a short amount of time, and as thanks for looking after them, the spirits teach you skills that help out with your chores. Through this exchange, you develop a closeness to each individual, and they begin to open up about their past life. When I give the chirpy frog Atul a bowl of popcorn, he's ecstatic at first because he loves any food I give him, but then talks about how he misses the movie nights he used to have with his family when he was alive.

The backstories of your passengers are not the usual fluff you might see in community sims like *Animal Crossing* or *Stardew Valley*. They hit harder because these characters are, well, dead. They reminisce on their old lives, the families they left behind, good times, bad times, and of course, their own deaths. In this way, they are more than just boat passengers – they're friends, guides, and confidants.

GOOD HEAVENS

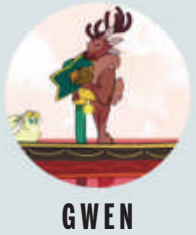
In *Spiritfarer*, no one truly knows what's on the other side as you enter the elusive doorway. Deciding to go through it is an uneasy choice, but one that *Spiritfarer*'s characters still ultimately make. Thunder Lotus always wanted *Spiritfarer* to be a death-positive game, and this is where that point shines the strongest.

When each character left, I found myself thinking of them. Whenever I made a cup of coffee I thought of Gwen. As I played the guitar to help my crops grow, Summer would pop into my mind. When I gathered berries, I would think about Atul's childlike love of them.

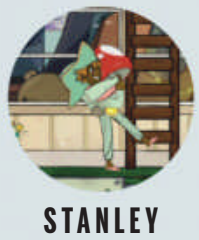
Spiritfarer understands that dying isn't just about someone not being there anymore, it's about the ways you think back on them after they're gone. Thunder Lotus has managed to create a sim that deals with the topics of death and compassion with wonderful balance. ■

FREE HUGS

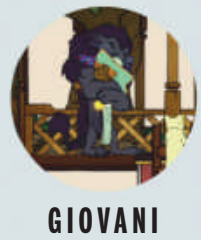
A selection of* Spiritfarer*'s best cuddlers



GWEN
The first character you hug in the game – it's a very special moment.



STANLEY
The little guy practically jumps into your arms and it's adorable.



GIOVANI
Hugging a lion with that majestic mane would be totally comfy.

DAFFODIL
Your cat companion with her fluffy tail is perfect for a warm nuzzle.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A wholesome life-sim where you ferry spirits into the afterlife

DEVELOPER
Thunder Lotus

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GeForce 2080 Super, AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32 GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
Yes (two player co-op)

LINK
thunderlotusgames.com

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

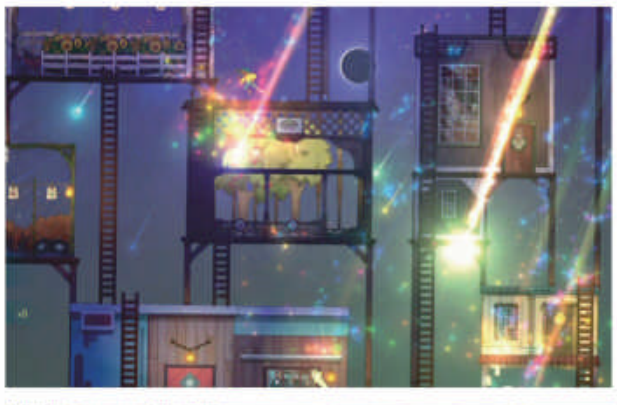
Spiritfarer is a thought provoking and bittersweet life sim that understands that death is part of living.

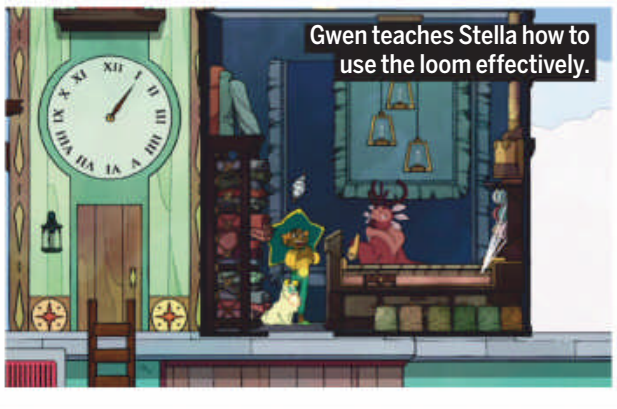
85

The mysterious Everdoor, the place where you say your final goodbyes.

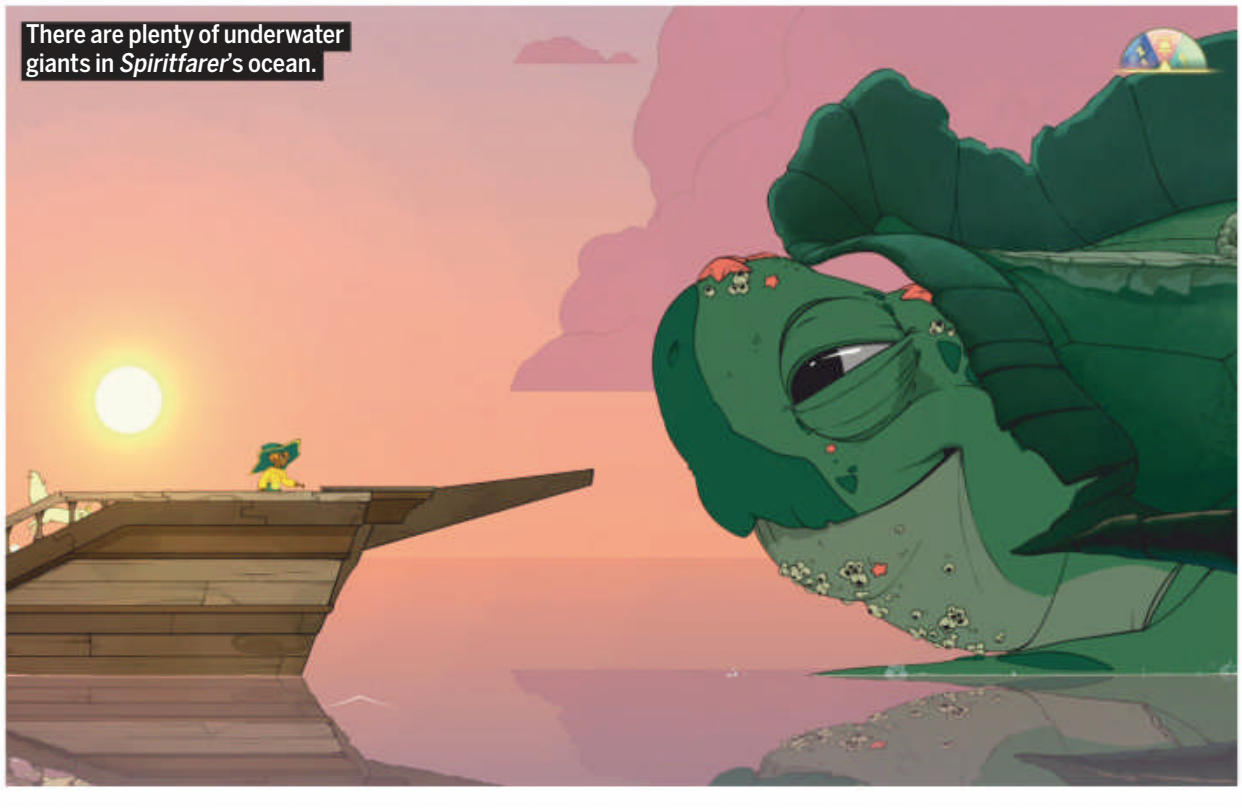
There's an incredible level of detail to the game's hand drawn art.

The best nutrient for radishes is music. Everyone knows that.





Gwen teaches Stella how to use the loom effectively.



There are plenty of underwater giants in *Spiritfarer*'s ocean.

ALL-TIME HIGH

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR takes 'open world' *very* literally. *By Phil Iwaniuk*

Do you ever wonder how it'd feel to take a few years away from games, and then peek back through the curtain once you'd become out of touch? Quite often, *Microsoft Flight Simulator* feels like that peek. In its scope and fidelity, it seems to be visiting from the future, when it's commonplace to have access to a photorealistic Planet Earth and the freedom to explore it. When you can hop in a plane and fly over your own town, in the same weather conditions and lighting you can see outside your window. When 'open world' truly means just that.

What a dramatic way for the *Microsoft Flight Simulator* series to reappear after years under Dovetail's DLC-focussed stewardship, and what a towering achievement from Asobo Studio. We'll be talking about the impossible detail of its 1:1 world map for years to come; reading retrospectives about how this piece of software changed environmental design; wandering around other games that harness petabytes of real map data and Cloud AI grunt as a matter of course.

This is a seismic moment for PC gaming then. But what's abundantly clear is that this is very much the beginning of *Microsoft Flight Simulator*'s journey, one moment on a roadmap that includes regular content updates on a monthly cadence and should by necessity also include just as many to fix some considerable teething technical issues. Release day has arrived, but whether that represents the launch of a finished product or an arbitrary demarcation along its journey to full completion is certainly up for debate.

What a towering achievement from Asobo Studio.

A total of 20 planes are included with the standard edition at launch, comprising three airliners, two jets and fifteen props. Using any one of those planes, you can position yourself on the runway of any airstrip in the world, take to the skies, and see a startlingly accurate recreation of the region below. It's a terrible moment for anyone who invested in all those scenery addon packs for *FSX*.

It's a premise with an appeal way beyond the flight sim's usual remit. Who wouldn't want to fly around in a playable, 4K, lightmapped version of Bing Maps with volumetric clouds and incredible weather effects? Who could resist the urge to try and find their own house? (I'm still yet to successfully locate mine, but the search continues.) That speaks to a much wider crowd than the previous 30-odd years of the series ever could.

With only a whisper of structure to your experience on the game's part, you're tacitly invited to devise your own adventures. Career progression only exists insofar as completing the flight school and ticking off the landing challenges and bush flights, which for their part offer excellent slices of curated content with leaderboard elements that give you ample reason to come back to them again and again. But you're not going to spend 100 hours on them.

Instead, you're going to plot a dark tourism tour on the world map, ticking off Chernobyl, The Polygon at Semipalatinsk, the Dylatov Pass. You'll tick off every F1 circuit on the race calendar. And you're going to have a fantastic time. The prospect of an entire planet to explore can be crippling too though, of course, so it would be great to see more curated experiences from Asobo in future.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A flight sim with all the world to enjoy

DEVELOPER
Asobo Studio

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
i7 9700K, RTX 2080 TI, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/2Qa2oF1

WORLD TOUR

So it's a simulator for people interested in flight, and a magical virtual tourism portal for people interested at peering into the Mir Mine in a prop they're controlling with a pad. The dividing line, then, is the method of control.

Traditionally, the simulation community reacts like the disgruntled locals in that pub from American Werewolf in London to an influx of casuals – and I say that as someone with half a pretend cockpit sitting on my desk – but there's no trace of sacrificing depth to cater for a broader audience here. The simulation model is more detailed than it's ever been, a statement you can put to the test yourself by switching between 'modern' and 'legacy' models in the game settings. Its realism is scalable, too, to allow

WINGING IT

Microsoft Flight Simulator*'s befuddling airliners*

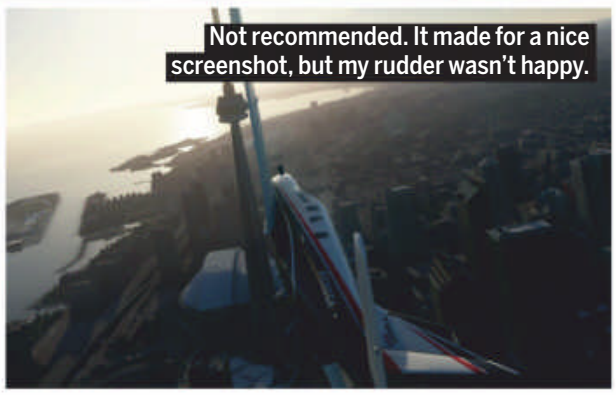
AIRBUS A320NEO
Max altitude: 39,800 Ft
Cruise speed: 455 KTAS
How does it fly? Who the fuck knows?

BOEING 747-8 INTERCONTINENTAL
Wingspan: 224.60 Ft
Length: 250.00 Ft
What do all these switches do? Not a clue.

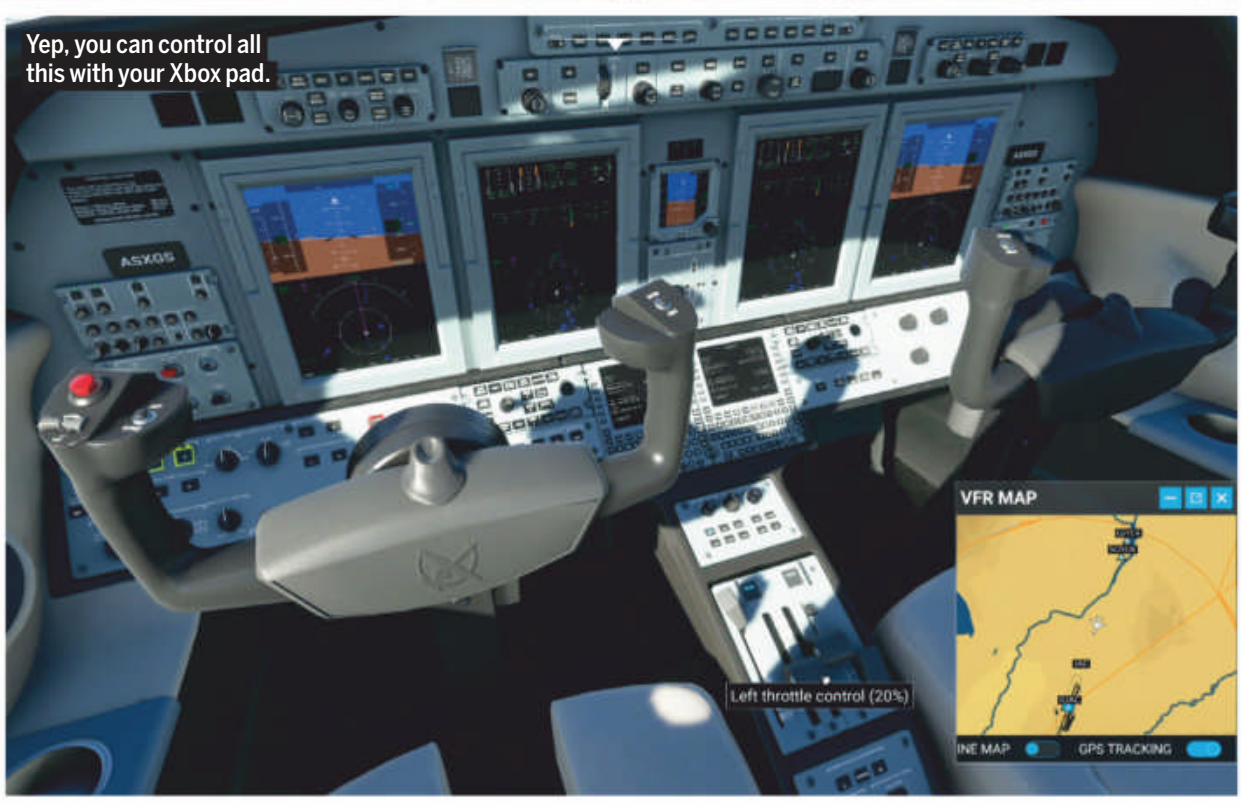
BOEING 787-10 DREAMLINER
Max weight: 557,000 lb
Range: 6,430 NM
What's that beeping? Ohgodohgodohgodoh...

Landing challenges like this Nice airport approach are deeply satisfying.

Did I make it, or did I fall in the drink? I'll never tell.


Not recommended. It made for a nice screenshot, but my rudder wasn't happy.

That's right, it's your house. I've been flying over your house and you can't stop me.



Stop it, *Microsoft Flight Simulator*. You're almost too much sometimes, you know that?

The game's first live landing challenge, an Alpine approach to a frankly silly runway.

Unlike other flight sims, the sense of scale holds up as you near ground level, too.

Would you believe I ended up landing this one just fine? No, and you'd be right not to.

for zero-stress virtual tourism with an Xbox controller or all-out simulation with a HOTAS setup.

Frankly the Xbox pad pilots are well-served here considering the volume of functions necessary to pilot a plane. Rudder and trim adjustment are over-sensitive by default, but that's an easy fix in the options menus. It seems absurd to be able to marshal such a rigorous physics model through the air using a pad, but it not only works, it actually feels pretty damn great.

Setting up a HOTAS and a few cockpit panels proves more of a challenge, however. By default the game double-mapped certain functions to my Logitech X56, most annoyingly the throttle power. It's an easy enough fix in the menus, but it took me a few attempted takeoffs to figure out which controls were cancelling each other out. With everything calibrated and the plane up in the air though, it's pretty magical using a HOTAS.

Its approach to teaching you how to fly a plane isn't that of a teacher, but a classroom. There's everything in here you could possibly need if you wanted to learn how to set a flight plan with ATC, power up an airliner from scratch, set a VOR vector up to cruise altitude and then an ILS approach in order to land again at your destination. It just doesn't tell you about any of it.

OK, that's actually quite uncharitable. The flight school teaches you the very basics in a hardy little Cessna 152 over eight lessons, from taxiing onto the runway and taking off, to a spot of VOR navigation and landing. But for newcomers there are vast unknown unknowns that you wouldn't think to search YouTube tutorials for because you don't know they exist, or even why you'd need to use them in the first place. ATC is left almost entirely untouched by the tutorial, and navigation isn't explained in enough detail to move straight on from flight school to a custom flight plan without considerable head-scratching and alt-tabbing. For all the game tells you, the pilot who flew your last long-haul flight sat at the yoke for hours on end making tiny adjustments every step of the way. This isn't going to be a problem for long, but it'll be the community's content creators that solve it rather than the game itself.

ABORT. ABORT.

The toughest landing challenges so far

1 LUKLA
Why is it so short? And on such a steep incline? Ponder these questions and more as you crash at the foot of Everest.

2 QUEENSTOWN
Heavy cloud, driving wind, and a landing strip that gives way to water soon after its end point. Should go well.

3 JFK
Boeing 747-8s are heavy. Bringing one to a gentle halt at 17 frames per second is the game's ultimate challenge.

However lost you might feel in the captain's seat, staring at a mass of blinking warning lights, you always want to figure it out. There's such intrinsic satisfaction in piecing together the puzzle of operating an aircraft, and every time you run through a pre-flight checklist you get your head around the cockpit layout that bit more. After a few hours you're raising the crash level and setting the source to BATT without even thinking about it.

BUGS ON THE WINDSHIELD

If the complexity of its simulation presents a bit of a barrier for entry, though, *Microsoft Flight Simulator*'s technical issues lay barbed wire around the door. First to contend with is the installation, which downloads a 500MB client in which the full 90GB install happens. Once it's installed, it takes about three minutes from hitting 'play' to reaching the main menu on an i7 9700K, 16GB RAM and RTX 2080 TI and the game installed to SSD, and the same system can get about 25fps out of big cities and major airports at ultra settings in 1600p.

Technical issues lay barbed wire around the door.

In reality that preset's a bit of future-proofing and the visual quality is certainly scalable, but performance doesn't scale proportionally. That means landing at JFK is still a stuttery affair using any preset, including low, which generally produces 30-35fps in cities on my system and a much more consistent 60 out in the wilderness. Crashes are fairly commonplace on my system too – unplugging or connecting a device results in an instant CTD, and scenes causing low frame rates have also seemed to trigger them, albeit less frequently. At the time of writing, several days after release, an Nvidia game-ready driver has improved FPS performance, albeit slightly. Frame rate dips are generally an annoyance, but here they're a real hindrance to your ability to control the plane. Landings require responsiveness and feather-light inputs, and if you're seeing them stutter you're not able to perform them properly.

However frustrating its performance issues are, there's a voice inside your head saying "Can you just give it a minute to render the entire world? Would that be OK?". Still, the fact is low frame rates impact your ability to fly the planes, and on the vast majority of systems, simply whacking the settings down to the low preset won't produce stable 60fps. Seems like the PC gaming community may have found its new *Crysis*.

In the shadow of *Microsoft Flight Simulator*'s achievements, its annoyances, though notable, are forgivable. Poor frame rates aren't reason enough to pass up on the chance to explore the entire planet in a manner games haven't allowed you to before, and slowly mastering its planes is a real payoff. Just don't expect perfection from day one. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

An incredible exploration portal with even greater potential once its tech issues have been addressed.

89

BOBBLE ROYALE

FALL GUYS: ULTIMATE KNOCKOUT is a cute yet still tense party royale. *By Chris Livingston*

I'm dressed as half-astronaut, half-ballerina when someone else dressed as a full hotdog grabs the tail pinned to my butt and runs off with it. I swear, chase them and make a last ditch dive to reclaim the tail as the clock expires. I miss and swear again. That hot dog just cost me the crown. *Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout* may be adorable and silly but that doesn't mean it's low-stakes. Despite the party game vibe, it's still a battle royale.

Each round of *Fall Guys* begins with 60 players rushing through an obstacle course in a chaotic mob of jumping, diving, whooping, and ragdolling bodies. Only the first 30 or so across the finish line qualify for the next round, which is randomly chosen from about two dozen different levels. Each level eliminates more players until the final round, where anywhere from a handful to more than a dozen compete to be the sole winner.

For most of a match I'm content to goof around, take reckless chances and stop to celebrate with emotes before crossing the finish line. Getting ragdolled out of contention usually just makes me laugh. But as the end of the final round approaches I'm suddenly taking things seriously as hell. I may be a bean wearing a frilly pink tutu, but I want to win.

There are a few different types of levels. Races are the most common, and sometimes you'll engage in several footraces through various obstacle courses in the same match. The courses may have giant spinning fan blades to knock players back, ramps coated in slippery slime, spinning balance beams, or vanishing floor tiles, walls that can be broken through, or giant pieces of fruit tumbling down the course, knocking players aside like bowling pins unless you dart and dodge around them.

I may be a bean wearing a frilly pink tutu, but I want to win

HEAD OVER HEELS

More exciting are the levels that act as an endurance competition, like Block Party, where everyone stands on a platform together as a series of walls sweep across it, forcing players to jostle and shove their way through small gaps to avoid being knocked off. Making a dive through the gap at the last second is exciting, and getting bottlenecked in a kludge of wriggling, hooting competitors is hilarious.

Other levels divide players into groups to achieve a goal, and these team games are among the best in *Fall Guys* because they provide opportunities to sabotage the other team. Most events in *Fall Guys* have you running alongside other players, but in team modes there's a real benefit to messing with them and disrupting their progress.

In Egg Scramble, teams fight over a pile of eggs in the centre of the map, grabbing as many as they can and depositing them in their team's basket – and then trying to pilfer a few more from the other teams' baskets before time runs out. In Rock 'N' Roll teams push a giant ball down an obstacle course to the finish line, and you can run ahead to block your opponent's balls, making for a frantic shoving and grabbing match. The downside is that in team games, if you don't have friends with you in the match, you're solely relying on a group of strangers you can't communicate with. You can be having a great run but lose because the rest of your randomly selected teammates can't get it together.

But randomness works for *Fall Guys*. It's so silly and breezy that if I'm eliminated because of shabby teammates, or if I get bonked into a pit because someone else blundered into a spinning fan and flew into me, I just laugh and shrug and queue up for another match. It's only in the final round where I care enough to swear. Damn that hot dog to hell.

Fall Guys is best enjoyed in small doses, and an hour of play a day is plenty. But that hour is usually great fun mixed with some delicious tension in the finals. It's an impressive feat to make a game so charmingly silly that's still filled with genuinely dramatic moments, heartbreaking losses and last-second acrobatic feats. ■

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A cute and frantic 60-player battle royale game show

DEVELOPER
Mediatonic

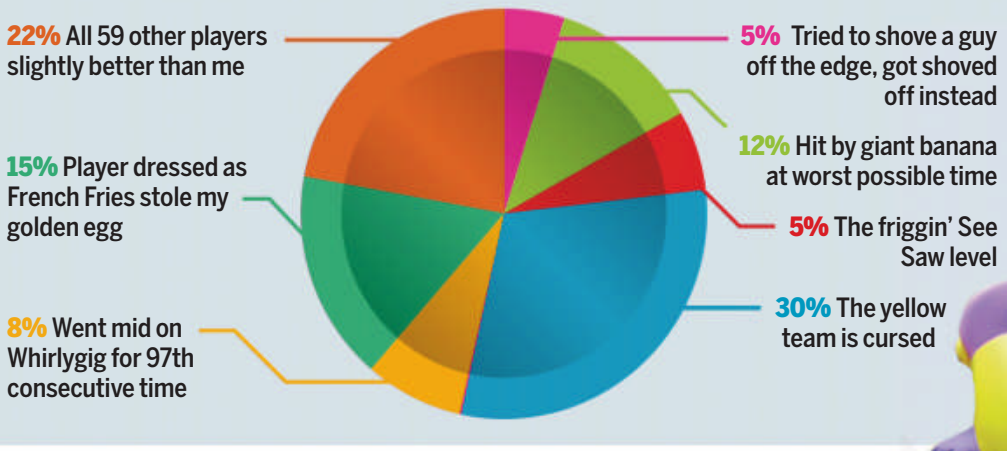
PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

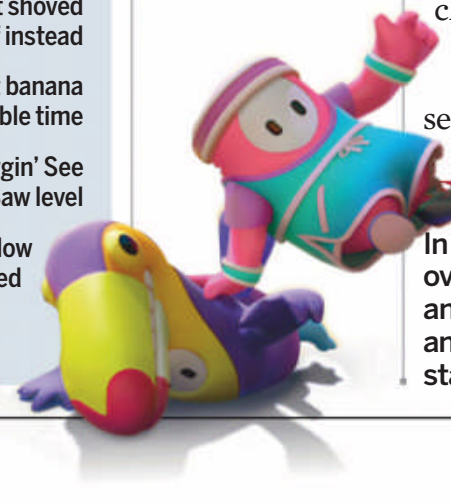
REVIEWED ON
RTX 2080, Intel i7-9700K , 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Only

LINK
fallguys.com

FAIL GUY *Common reasons I lost that* Fall Guys *Match*


22% All 59 other players slightly better than me
15% Player dressed as French Fries stole my golden egg
8% Went mid on Whirlygig for 97th consecutive time
5% Tried to shove a guy off the edge, got shoved off instead
12% Hit by giant banana at worst possible time
5% The friggin' See Saw level
30% The yellow team is cursed



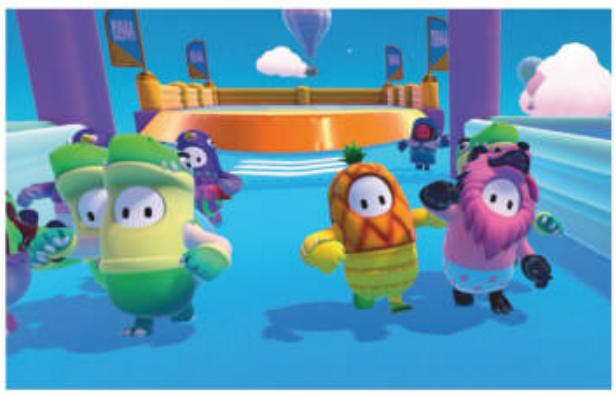
PowerPlay VERDICT

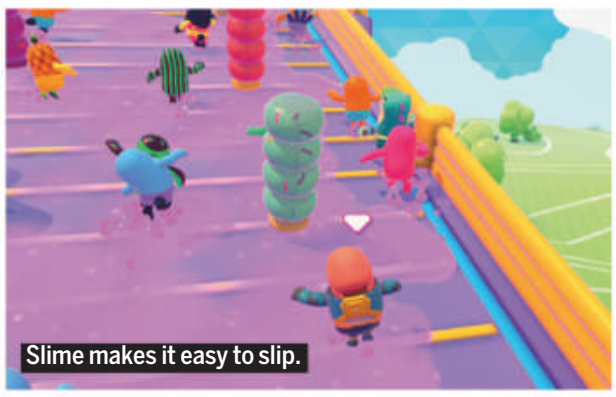
In a genre that is overstuffed with guns and grenades, this cute and cuddly battle royale stands out.

80

Following the crowd is a good strat (except on the final level).

The easiest level, hardly anyone gets eliminated.





Slime makes it easy to slip.

Out of 60, only one can wear the crown.

Fall Ball is like *Rocket League*, but with no rockets and an extra ball.

SNOW JOKE

Make friends with weirdos in cold Colorado in WASTELAND 3

By Jody Macgregor

The *Wasteland* games have always mixed grit with silliness, offsetting slavery and cannibalism with mutant killer bunnies and the like. That's one of the things that hasn't changed in *Wasteland 3*, which is still an RPG where malfunctioning toasters can be cracked open for loot if you've got the Toaster Repair skill, and my squad of hardened wasteland warriors is joined by a goat, a swearing parrot, a cyborg chicken, and a cat who wears a hat.

What's different is the setting. The endless sand of Arizona and California has been traded for the endless snow of Colorado. Your Desert Rangers are way out of their depth here, sent north to cut a deal with the prosperous local leader for supplies your home desperately needs, which means helping the patriarch of Colorado Springs round up his rebellious offspring. Each of his three large adult children have sided with different bizarre factions, from Reagan worshippers to Hispanic murderclowns, and you're thrust into this political shitfight with only your wits, an AI car, a bunch of guns, and those three points you probably shouldn't have put in Toaster Repair.

Wasteland 3 is also less old school than *Wasteland 2*. That was a game where you'd find a loot container then have the character with Perception check it for traps, then a character with Alarm Disarming or Demolitions render it safe, then if it was locked use Lockpicking or Safecracking or Brute Force to open it. Now some of those skills have been excised and if you click on something the character who has the right skill will just automatically interact with it.

Only a few of the members of your own party get much personality.t6

The turn-based combat has been streamlined as well. When you mouse over a position before moving it'll highlight who you can attack from there just like *XCOM 2*, complete with revised percentages over their heads. Gone is the tickertape full of text describing your attacks in favour of a UI that's less diegetic, but easier to get to grips with.

The combat stayed interesting even as I got near the 50-hour mark, which I can't say of *Wasteland 2*. I enjoyed it all the way through, both due to fights that had more twists to them – sometimes you get to bring your car and its mounted cannon, and often you can stealth into position, crouching behind cover before attacking with your character who has the Sneaky Shit skill for bonus damage – and also because the story held my attention.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A post-nuclear roleplaying game

EXPECT TO PAY
£55

DEVELOPER
InXile Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, Intel Core i7, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GTX 1060

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
inxile-entertainment.com/wasteland3

ICE TO MEET YOU

The *Wasteland* games tend to have some interesting factions but not interesting characters. Here I felt a little more attached to NPCs like Scotchmo the alcoholic and Vic the taunting serial killer because I'd seen them up close. It feels more personal.

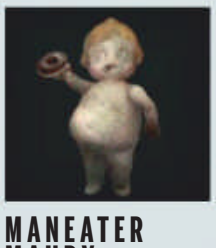
While most conversations play out from a slightly zoomed-in version of the isometric view, some major characters get first-person scenes with mocapped performances full of expressive interactions. They reminded me of the theatrical NPCs of *Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines*, which is high praise.

That said, I struggle to remember the name of the cyborg gang leader or the green-skinned Ranger I recruited. Only a few of the members of your own party get much personality, as there's no way to talk to them except by wandering around hoping to stumble over a conversation trigger. Even the pre-generated pairs of PCs you can choose from if you don't want to make your own aren't chatty.

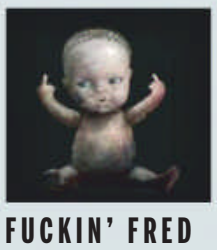
Like its predecessors, *Wasteland 3* is the kind of game where the most interesting story is the one you make, usually thanks to that juxtaposition of seriousness and silliness. Maybe you created a character who dressed like a clown and inflicted certain status effects on enemies by throwing yellow (it's piss) snowballs at them, or maybe you went into battle with a herd of vicious mutant animals – at least until you got sick of them and abandoned even the swearing parrot to bleed out in the snow. ■

CHILD'S PLAY

Fallout *has bobbleheads,* Wasteland 3 *has creepy dolls that boost your stats*

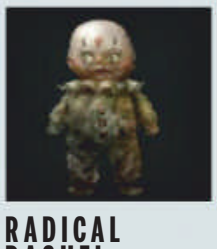


MANEATER MAURY
Like cannibalism, he makes you healthier.



FUCKIN' FRED
This tiny edgelord gives bonus damage against humans.

ELECTRIC EMMETT
Give your energy weapons a damage boost with this lad.



RADICAL RACHEL
Bonus to explosive damage, will quote The Dark Knight.

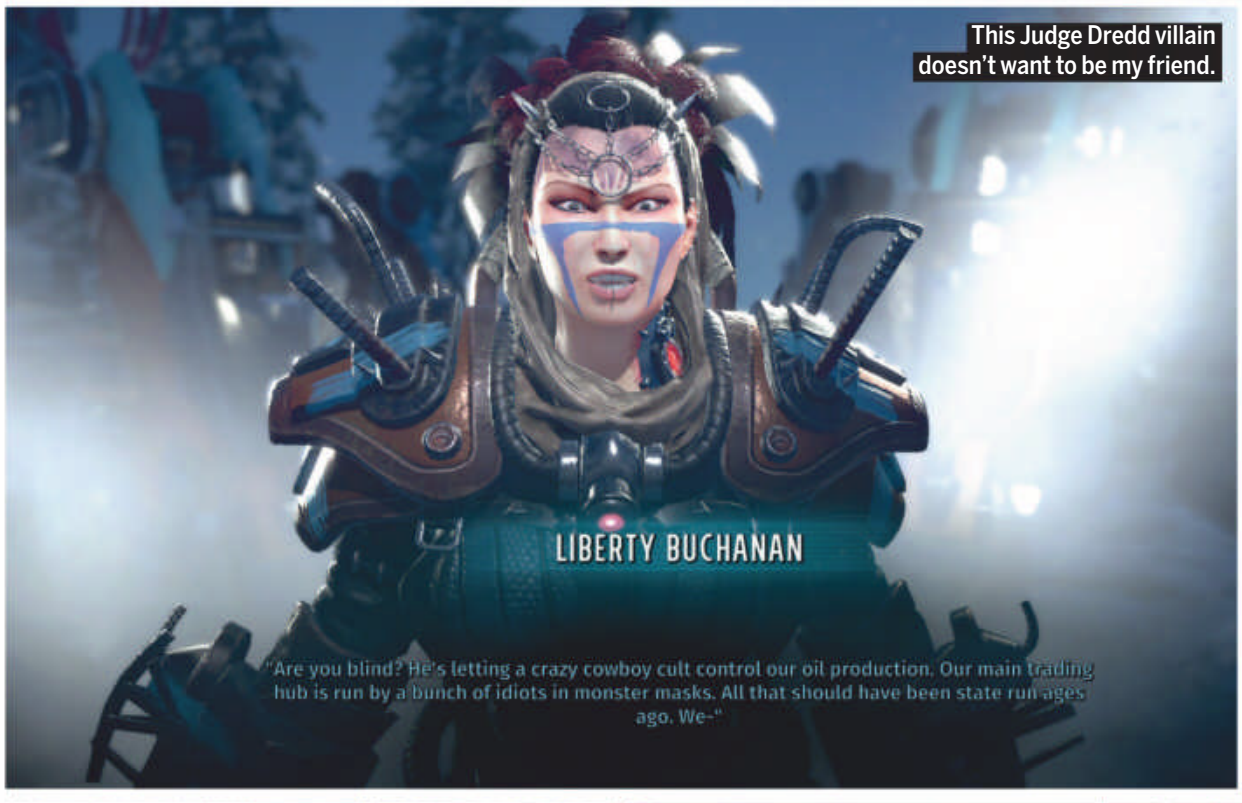
CRUEL COREY
Additional damage caused to animals because *Wasteland 3* goes there.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

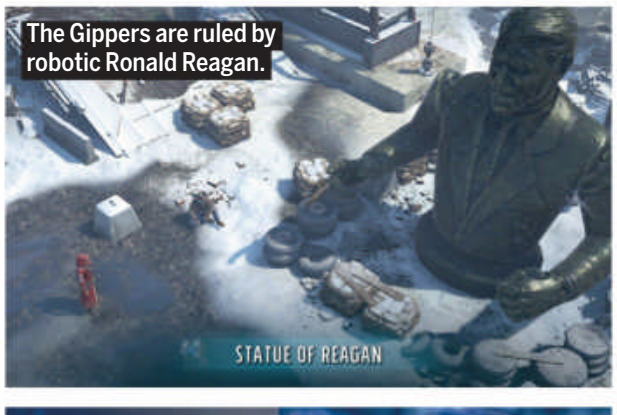
A strange setting explored through a predictable but enjoyable RPG that's been streamlined just enough.

84

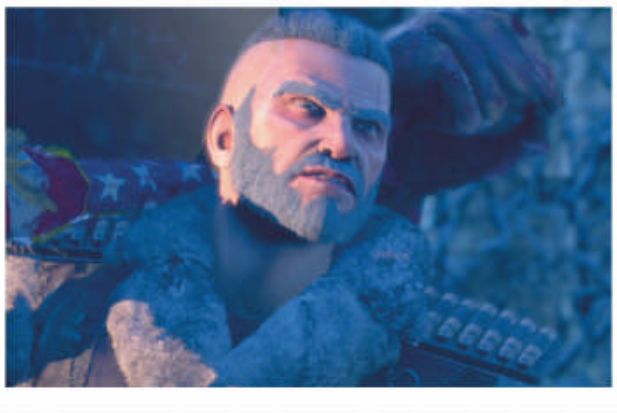
Cover is very important during fights.


LIBERTY BUCHANAN
"Are you blind? He's letting a crazy cowboy cult control our oil production. Our main trading hub is run by a bunch of idiots in monster masks. All that should have been state run ages ago. We-"
This Judge Dredd villain doesn't want to be my friend.

Everything's on fire. Again.



The Gippers are ruled by robotic Ronald Reagan.



Meanwhile this discoball is a powerful ally.

Tech

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K INTEL.COM.AU
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO ASUS.COM.AU
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 CRUCIAL.COM
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One of the best pre-built gaming machines of the year.

PRICE $2,998 **ONLINE** www.asus.com

The best gaming PCs - and best gaming laptops, to an extent - come in all shapes, sizes, and, of course, configurations. However, this doesn't mean that cramming the most expensive components inside is key to victory. We've seen more carefully considered designs in the last few years, and this has resulted in some great machines that tone down the desire to cram in the latest components and opt for more deliberate combinations (all while offering an easy and straightforward way into PC gaming). The ASUS GA15 does exactly that.

The case is slick black in its aesthetic, and on the whole, and I could almost leave it at that. However, there are some accents to the design which are cool and/or make for good functionality. All over the case, be it the neat frontage or relatively plain majority of the case, there are vents and holes everywhere. These work both aesthetically and functionally, never impacting the design, and also providing plenty of built-in airflow.

Importantly, the ASUS GA15, much like most pre-builts from the big players, comes in a vast array of builds. Using GPUs as a broad-brush barometer of build 'power', this can stretch from machines with Nvidia 1650 cards, all the way up to a 2070 Super or an AMD 5700XT. There are fewer processors to choose from but that's no problem when they all harbor AMD Ryzen excellence. As you can see from the specs box, the build sent in to us blends those worlds of Ryzen processors and Nvidia graphics cards to create a PC at the lower-end of the ray-tracing spectrum, but one that offers a lot of bang for your buck. The 2060 Super card is probably the best value card for ray-tracing now, while the Ryzen 7 processor is an equally excellent component that balances performance, reliability, and durability with an affordable price tag. Supported by that dual storage combo, and 16GB of RAM, this is what I would call a 'sensible high-end' build.

At 1080p, this PC can provide blistering experiences - getting close to 60fps in Metro Exodus on its RTX benchmark is an achievement, for sure. This also bodes well for gaming at 1440p if settings are toned down a bit, too. While it might not give you every tiny detail combined with the incredibly high frame rates that a high-end Alienware gaming PC and laptop might offer, you'll still get just as satisfying and enjoyable a gaming experience on it. The GA15 never struggles to run a AAA or demanding game, and it'll just go about its business presenting games to you at an enormously enjoyable level of fidelity and smoothness. It all runs quietly too, and I've barely ever heard it struggle – or even work hard, really – no matter the task or game.
ROB DWIAR

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

A tremendous gaming PC where value, performance, and considered component choice all meet.

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GAMING HEADSET

RTX 3080 – The next gen is here

Hold onto your hats ladies and gentleman! The launch of a new generation of Nvidia graphics cards is always a major event, and here it is with **Chris Szewczyk** in the Labs.

PRICE $1,469 **ONLINE** www.msi.com

The GeForce RTX 3080 is the lead card of the brand new Ampere range. It's joined by the RTX 3090 (a consumer level Titan replacement) and soon the RTX 3070 and RTX 3060. Ampere cards incorporate everything great about the Turing architecture and improve on it. The RTX 3080 is faster in games, offers better AI performance, it packs in cutting edge technology support and features improved ray tracing capabilities. If Turing served as a teaser of the possibilities of ray tracing, the Ampere generation may be the one that elevates it from a technology with potential into one that becomes as commonly enabled as anti-aliasing or anisotropic filtering.

WHAT'S UNDER THE HOOD

At the heart of the RTX 3080 lies the GA102 GPU. This is actually the same GPU as the one that powers the RTX 3090, but with one of the shader clusters disabled. The 3080 packs in 8,704 CUDA cores vs the 4,352 of the outgoing RTX 2080 Ti. 10GB of brand new GDDR6X memory ticks along at 19Gbps, up from the 14Gbps of the 2080 Ti. The GPU is built with Samsung's 8nm process, a surprise in itself when TSMC has long been the preferred supplier of Nvidia GPUs. The GPU crams 28.3 billion transistors into its 628.4mm² package. This is a very large and complex GPU. If by chance you're thinking about SLI, don't. Only the RTX 3090 supports it.

MSI GeForce RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio; 8704 CUDA Cores; 1815 MHz Boost Clock; 10GB GDDR6X 19Gbps memory, 760 GB/s Memory Bandwidth; 3x Display Port 1.4, 1x HDMI 2.1; 3x 8-Pin Power Connector, 340W TDP.

The Ampere architecture contains improved Deep Learning and AI technologies. Deep Learning Super Sampling 2.0 (DLSS) uses details from multiple frames in order to produce an image. Rather than forcing the GPU to render every displayed image, the rendering burden is lessened. With the improved performance of the Tensor cores, Nvidia claims that 8K gaming is well and truly possible on Ampere graphics cards. To game at 8K, you need improved display support, and the RTX 3080 has it.

HDMI 2.1 is now included, which means support for 8K 60Hz or 4K 144Hz displays. There's PCI Express 4.0 support and upgraded video capabilities including AV1

decode support. The Founders Edition incorporates a new 12 pin PSU connector, though for now the Founders cards are the only ones we've seen supporting this connector. The MSI RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio we're using for this review uses standard 8 pin power connectors (three of them actually!) The MSI includes a single HDMI 2.1 port and three 1.4a DisplayPorts.

One of the really interesting new technologies introduced with Ampere is RTX IO. This is a toolset that utilises the GPU to accelerate storage performance including things like improving game loading times and file compression. The upcoming consoles are expected to use something similar so this is a tech to keep an eye out for once games begin to incorporate it.

In addition to cutting edge hardware, Nvidia is also introducing new software tools and applications. One of these is Nvidia Reflex, which aims to reduce total system latency. Competitive e-sports is big business and improving the responsiveness and latency of a system beginning with a mouse click and ending with an action on screen is the goal. With refresh rates reaching 360Hz and higher, milliseconds count.

PRICING AND PERFORMANCE

Australian pricing (quoted pre-release) seems to be quite reasonable. The MSI RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio has an RRP of $1,469. This compares to $1,139 for the Founders Edition. These prices may prove to be optimistic if initial demand greatly outstrips supply.

MSI's cooling solution uses its proven Tri Frozr triple-fan array, while the Founders Edition has a new and unique twin-fan design.

"THE GPU CRAMS 28.3 BILLION TRANSISTORS INTO ITS 628.4MM² PACKAGE. THIS IS A VERY LARGE AND COMPLEX GPU. IF BY CHANCE YOU'RE THINKING ABOUT SLI, DON'T. ONLY THE RTX 3090 SUPPORTS IT."

Having said that, it's important to remember that people were asked to pay over $2,000 for the top tier 2080 Ti's so to have a card that's much faster while costing 25 percent less is something that Nvidia and partners deserve credit for.

The only real downside is the jump in power consumption. While the performance per watt is better compared to the last generation, we can't get used to a new normal where graphics cards pull close to 400W. We are at the limit. Where do graphics cards go from here? 450 or 500W? Four slot coolers? Please let this be the ceiling!

We're up to HDMI 2.1 now, and DP 1.4a for connectivity, though exact configurations will vary depending on the model.

Now that we've gone over some of the tech and features introduced with Ampere and the RTX 3080, let's jump into a look at a card. You might ask, why aren't we covering the RTX 3080 Founders Edition? We were planning to up until the last minute, but sadly Covid continues to wreak havoc with courier services and it didn't arrive in time before we went to print. Keep an eye out for that and 3080s from other vendors in our next issue! We thank MSI for stepping up and sending through its first 3080 card quickly so we could get our initial tech and architecture review in this issue for you.

MSI RTX 3080 GAMING X TRIO

MSI graphics cards are typically very capable and come with a solid reputation, particularly the high end Twin- and Tri Frozr-equipped models, along with its strong PCB designs. The RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio appears to be another top quality entry by MSI. It's a big, beefy card that takes up three slots. The cooler fins and fans have been redesigned. The fans themselves have pairs of blades connected at the ends for improved static pressure. The heatsink fins are waved for improved dissipation properties and the GPU heatpipes are squared off for maximum die contact. Even the attractive backplate has an embedded heatpipe. And, it's been infused with graphene! We're starting to

RTX 3080 BENCHMARK RESULTS

Indicates Best Result

	Metro: Exodus						F1 2020					
	1920x1080 Ultra Preset		2560x1440 Ultra Preset		3840x2160 Ultra Preset		1920x1080 Ultra Preset		2560x1440 Ultra Preset		3840x2160 Ultra Preset	
	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg
MSI GeForce RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio	64.2	132.2	59.2	109.1	46.1	71.0	196	224	161	185	116	131
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti	55.4	108.6	51.1	85.4	35.1	54.1	171	200	141	161	88	98
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super	48.5	90.0	42.7	71.6	28.9	44.7	150	175	120	138	75	84
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super	43.6	79.7	37.7	62.8	25.2	39.0	133	156	108	123	66	73
AMD Radeon RX 5700 XT	40.4	73.3	34.6	57.7	23.7	35.7	137	170	109	132	66	75

	Middle Earth: Shadow of War						Total War: Warhammer II					
	1920x1080 Ultra Preset		2560x1440 Ultra Preset		3840x2160 Ultra Preset		1920x1080 Ultra Preset		2560x1440 Ultra Preset		3840x2160 Ultra Preset	
	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg
MSI GeForce RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio	39	196	37	154	30	99		158.9		130.1		76.7
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti	35	166	36	121	30	75		136.8		101.4		56.5
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super	36	137	33	100	25	61		108.8		79.6		46.4
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super	35	124	32	90	25	55		101.1		71.8		39.9
AMD Radeon RX 5700 XT	33	116	28	78	22	47		89.7		61.9		32.9

	Ghost Recon: Breakpoint						Shadow of the Tomb Raider					
	1920x1080 Ultra Preset		2560x1440 Ultra Preset		3840x2160 Ultra Preset		1920x1080 Ultra Preset		2560x1440 Ultra Preset		3840x2160 Ultra Preset	
	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg	Min	Avg
MSI GeForce RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio	60	126	60	105	58	71	165	197	123	151	74	86
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti	60	107	61	86	46	56	129	164	94	114	54	63
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super	60	95	60	74	26	44	112	140	80	96	43	51
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super	61	88	56	68	27	39	101	127	70	86	38	45
AMD Radeon RX 5700 XT	59	90	54	67	15	17	98	118	67	79	35	41

get the feeling that the RTX 3080 needs some serious cooling. There's also a nice little RGB light bar that can be controlled via MSI's Mystic Light app.

Under full load, the cooler cannot be heard above the sounds of our AIO cooling fans or even the sound of the pump. Unless you have an airflow restricted case, we're confident in saying that this MSI won't be distracting you during your gaming sessions. There appears to be a hard limit of 350W for the whole card. Time restrictions prevented us from testing our sample cards with Nvidia's new power measurement tools, but we did record a full system peak power consumption of 487W. Bear in mind that's including an overclocked 10900K, plus fans and an AIO cooler etc. We consider that to be not too bad, though perhaps we too are becoming desensitised to high power consumption figures.

It's not just a quiet cooler, it's effective too. During a looping test at 100 percent load, the highest temperature we saw was just 69c. This allows the boost clock to stay at an insanely high level. At this temperature we saw fluctuations between 1950MHz and as high as 1985MHz. That's well above the card's rated 1815MHz rated boost clock. Will some custom cards feature boost clocks above 2.0 GHz? Surely the answer is yes. Our 3080 Founders Edition may have fallen off the back of a courier truck somewhere in Australia, but we don't think it's a leap to assume that premium tier custom cards like MSI's will significantly outperform the Founders Edition in terms of noise levels, temperatures and importantly, the maximum boost clocks. We'd expect that though given the price premium.

Indicates Best Result

	Temperatures ©		3DMark	
	Idle	Load	Time Spy Extreme	Fire Strike Extreme
MSI GeForce RTX 3080 Gaming X Trio	31	70	8,707	20,239
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti	36	68	6,815	16,068
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Super	38	72	5,524	13,285
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2070 Super	36	76	4,987	11,995
AMD Radeon RX 5700 XT	37	82	4,469	12,356

Now we come to biggest question we all have. How does it perform? Very well indeed! The RTX 3080 is way ahead of the outgoing RTX 2080 Ti. Bear in mind this card is actually replacing the RTX 2080 and 2080 Super in the product stack, and in that case it's an absolute belting. The performance per watt isn't massively improved but if you're going to drop $1,500 on a GPU, you probably aren't worried about power consumption when you're getting such a huge gain in performance.

At 4K it's a good 25 percent faster than the previous flagship 2080 Ti, and well over 50 percent faster than its direct predecessor, the RTX 2080 Super. The difference isn't as big at lower resolutions, indicating that even a 5.1GHz all core 10900K is somewhat of a bottleneck, even at maximum settings! It's crazy really. The 3080 only really makes sense if you're gaming at maximum settings at 4K, you use an ultrawide, or use multiple screens (hello to all you sim racers!). Users with very high refresh rate monitors will love it too.

The MSI Gaming X Trio is damn fast. It offers good value too; at least, we hope so. We won't be surprised to see some price gouging going on in the shops once the initial batches sell out. Will the choice of Samsung as the foundry partner prevent shortages from happening? Time will tell.

MSI is moving away from bold colours in its products, using a very nice pure black for this, and leaving the owner to customise the look via RGB lighting.

Nvidia is off to a very strong start with the first of its RTX 30 series. The RTX 3080 sets a new bar, and the MSI flavour only raises it higher. And this is only the beginning. There's still the mighty RTX 3090 to come, and don't forget the very exciting RTX 3070 and 3060 models. These two in particular may really shake up the market if they are priced competitively. We're sure they'll sell like hotcakes anyway. The pressure is really on AMD now. RDNA2 cards will need to be something special if they are to compete with Nvidia in any relevant measure. The next great GPU battle has begun. Oh what a time to be a PC gamer. PC

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The RTX 3080 redefines the high end GPU market with a stunning generational leap.

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GAMING HEADSET

Sennheiser GSP 670

Sheer wireless luxury

PRICE $469 **ONLINE** www.eposaudio.com

Visually, the GSP 670 continues the GSP family's aesthetic, which one might unkindly describe as Terminator earmuffs. The headset's overall look is probably the aspect with which I'm least enamored. But Sennheiser was right to keep the headset's scheme muted by using black and gray and avoiding RGB lighting or accent colors. With this many angles and surfaces, you don't need any additional details.

Fortunately for your head, the GSP 670's physical looks are the result of careful choices made in the name of comfort. At 398g, it's on the heavy side for a gaming headset, but discomfort simply isn't an issue with these cans. This is thanks to the mechanical outline of the headband and metal single-sided yoke, combined with an adjustable caliper pressure system at the top of the headband. By adjusting two sliders at each side of the headband, you can control precisely how much pressure the earcups exert on your delicate cranium, which is fantastically handy for anyone with an especially large or small head.

A perennial favorite feature of mine about Sennheiser's gaming headsets is the boom arm design. In short, it has a mic mute built in so that you're automatically muted when pushing the arm up and back to broadcasting when it's down. The satisfying click felt when doing this really tells of the construction quality. I defy you not to move it up and down aimlessly, just enjoying the sensation, when you first use the headset.

A newer feature on the Senny cans is the inclusion of separate chat and game mix controls on the left earcup. I actively miss the chat mix thumb wheel of Arctis-brand headsets when we use rivals, so it's great to see similar control schemes adopted elsewhere. You couldn't master an album using them, but for gaming, movies, TV and music, these cans sounded wonderful. There's a liveliness to them, which I suspect comes down to the luxuriousness of the contact points as much as the drivers. I could feel the music swelling and pulsing in pressure changes, as well as hear it. It's a sensation I've always loved in Bose's closed-back headphones and am always thrilled to find in the gaming market. Perhaps some gamers will find it a bit too busy at the bass end, but the GSP 670 really speaks to my personal preference.

This headset is virtual 7.1 surround sound compatible by using the Sennheiser Gaming Suite software's Binaural Rendering Engine. If you want to get serious and listen out for positional audio cues in the likes of CS:GO, Sennheiser's proprietary surround algorithm has your back and, indeed, your front and sides.

PHIL IWANIUK

"FORTUNATELY FOR YOUR HEAD, THE GSP 670'S PHYSICAL LOOKS ARE THE RESULT OF CAREFUL CHOICES MADE IN THE NAME OF COMFORT."

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

The Sennheiser GSP 670 is a truly luxurious and comprehensive wireless gaming headset that really sings, whether for music, film, or gaming.

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GAMING HEADSET

JBL Quantum One Gaming Headset

Is the new flagship headset from JBL worth the money?

PRICE $499 **ONLINE** www.jbl.com.au

A new challenger enters the gaming headset ring with the JBL Quantum One, a brand-new flagship model of JBL's new Quantum range of audio options. It's a bit on the pricey side at $499, but the JBL Quantum One provides studio-level sound at an affordable price.

And not just for one console, either. Interchangeable between the Nintendo Switch, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, and PC, this headset is adaptable to however you play with both a 3.5mm headphone wire and a USB audio mixer included in the box.

It's not quite perfect, but if you want wireless audio on every console you own and spatial audio when you play on PC, the Quantum One is a great option.

The look and feel of the headphones are sure to impress right out of the box: Despite packing so much audio power, the JBL Quantum One is light and comfortable on the head, never feeling like it's weighing you down or hurting your neck.

Aesthetically, the sleek design of the Quantum One is really eye-catching, with the JBL logo prominently displayed on both earphones. Plugging in the USB mixer and seeing them light up with every color on the spectrum only made them even more impressive. We only wish that feature would come across when wearing them on console, but as it stands the USB mixer won't work Xbox One or PlayStation 4.

In terms of performance, the JBL Quantum One reminds us of the LucidSound LS50X, fitting perfectly around my ears and sealing off most outside audio. Moreover, the audio is close to the best we've ever heard in a gaming headset, with every minute detail coming through clean and clear thanks to the amazing customisable surround sound.

The spatial audio tech that the Quantum One hangs its hat on is certainly cool, but it wouldn't always match the direction I was facing which definitely hurt the immersion. Thankfully there's a small button on the device that adjusts the feature back to center, so all we had to do was look straight ahead, touch the button, and problem solved.

Unfortunately that wasn't the only problem we experienced with the headphones, though: the right headphone would cut out at times, requiring us to readjust the jack in the controller's port, and the microphone wouldn't pick up our voice unless we were practically eating it. Also, it might have been because we tested an early sample, but voices coming in sounded muffled even with the console's settings maxed.

The in-game audio always sounded incredible when it was functioning properly, the surround and spatial sound fully intact, but these minor hiccups kept the JBL Quantum One headset from being the best all-around choice for consoles.

JASON FANELLI

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

The JBL Quantum ONE is a versatile headset that works for every gaming format, but because of the accompanying USB audio mixer, it's a better PC headset than a console one.

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GAMING MONITOR

LG UltraGear 34GN850

Large and luscious.

PRICE $1,599 **ONLINE** www.lg.com

On paper, the 34GN850 certainly ticks plenty of boxes. The 34-inch curved panel sports 3,440 by 1,440 pixels. If that's predictable, LG's Nano IPS screen is a bit special. LG says it's good for 1ms response, which puts it on a par with the best TN panels. Impressive.

Speaking of speed and slickness, you also get 160Hz refresh, plus both Nvidia G-Sync and AMD FreeSync Premium support. For the record, G-Sync support is G-Sync Compatible Verified rather than one of the fuller featured G-Sync offerings based on Nvidia's in-monitor image processing chipset.

But what of HDR support, you ask? It's present, but also an area where the LG UltraGear 34GN850 is a little light on spec given the heady price point. You only get VESA DisplayHDR400 certification. That's pretty much the very lowest available rung of HDR certification. So the 34GN850 lacks local dimming and tops out at 400 nits.

Another relative disappointment is the omission of USB Type-C connectivity. Now, it's true that USB-C is arguably not a top priority for gamers, who will mostly be connecting this panel to a beefy desktop rig. But a fair few gamers use portables and, for at least some of them, the ability to drive the display, charge and connect peripherals with a single cable will be missed.

That said, it's a great looking bit of kit with its Vader-esque glossy black plastic and a few flashes of the obligatory "gamer red" to spice things up without tipping over into adolescent over exuberance. It also offers a good range of height and tilt adjustment.

On the subject of great looking things, the 34GN850's LG NanoIPS panel certainly falls into that category. It positively zings with colour and vibrancy. Contrast is great too, which isn't always the case with IPS screens, especially those rated at a mere 1,000:1 for static contrast.

As for the questions of speed and response, the answer is qualified. The 160Hz refresh will be bags for all but the most hair-trigger honed of esports aficionados. Paired with either G-Sync or FreeSync and a powerful graphics card, this monitor is nothing if not buttery smooth.

The pixel response is a little more complicated. LG has included three levels of pixel overdrive in the UltraGear 34GN850's OSD menu. The top setting is very quick, but also suffers from inverse ghosting. The middle setting is a better compromise. Again, it'll be good enough for nearly all gamers. But the most sensitive will recognise that the best TN panels are still that little bit more resistant to blur.

It's a similar story with the HDR capabilities. The 34GN850 is a clear cut above a typical SDR display for brightness and dynamic range. But it doesn't get close to the eye-pummeling punch of a true HDR screen.

The bottom line? Almost all games look gorgeous on LG's UltraGear 34GN850. But improved HDR capability and the addition of USB-C would make it easier to swallow that prodigious price tag.
JEREMY LAIRD

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

LG's luscious new 34-inch 160Hz NanoIPS monitor is a gamer's delight. But it comes at a heck of a price.

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PC CASE

Thermaltake V150 TG

Tt continues to offer solid budget cases that still look sharp.

PRICE $99 **ONLINE** www.thermaltake.com.au

We're really liking Thermaltake's current commitment to budget cases with high-end looks, and that appreciation is continuing with the V150 TG, a mighty micro-ATX chassis with not one but two tempered-glass panels that lets you show off your PC's interior in style.

Out of the box the case has an elegantly austere look, with curved sides on the front fascia softening the design somewhat. But it's those glass panels – one on the side, and one on the front – that will bring the case to life once some shiny RGB hardware is installed. That said, if bright lights aren't your first concern, the V150 TG might not be the ideal choice.

The top panel features a removable dust-cover secured by magnets, along with the usual I/O array, including a single USB3 port. Air intakes run vertically down either side of the front panel, and while there is a strip of mesh along each intake, it's rather flimsy and likely will not block all dust ingress. Still, at this price point, it's better than nothing, but if you do install any kind of intake fan, be warned. There's another filter on the bottom of the case, though this one simply slots in rather than being secured magnetically. The case's feet are well-secured with soft rubber pads, which is a nice touch.

Access to the interior is wonderfully simple thanks to the hinged glass panel, so you can get to your PC's innards without having to worry about thumb-screws. The panel also features drop-hinge design, so you can easily remove it entirely while building and upgrading to ensure it doesn't get in the way or pick an annoying scratch. Two screws secure the other panel, and there's a handy amount of room behind the motherboard plate for cable management. The case also includes a PSU shroud, with even more room to tuck away cabling.

Stock cooling is about what you'd expect, with just a single 120mm fan mounted on the rear panel to valiantly suck away hot air. You can add up to two more 120mm or 140mm fans on the front panel, and up to a 140mm fan on the top, but if we were building into this case, we'd choose an AIO liquid cooling solution and mount a radiator in the front panel.

In Terms of storage, you won't be building a massive RAID array into the V150, but there's room for two each of 2.5-inch and 3.5-inch drives, plus whatever's built onto your motherboard, which isn't shabby. There's room for video cards up to 350mm in length, and power supplies up to 220mm long. There are ample cutouts to manage cables, and the metal edges have been smoothed and rounded to prevent wear and tear on both your fingers and your cabling.

DAVID HOLLINGWORTH

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

Thermaltake continues to prove that 'budget' doesn't necessarily mean 'ugly', and while you're not getting too many bells and whistles in the V150 TG, you do get some nice design flourishes and a perfectly workmanlike chassis to build upon.

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ADVERTORIAL

ASUS reinvents the new RTX 30 series

EXPERIENCE THE BRILLIANCE OF RAY TRACING WITH THE GEFORCE RTX RANGE.

The next generation of gaming is upon us, and it has a name: ray tracing. This rendering technique, which is essentially a new way of tracking the way light hits virtual objects, has taken PC graphics to the next level – lighting is more realistic, reflections are far more detailed, everything looks shinier and better, more realistic. It's a huge revolution in games graphics, and with the right graphics card and monitor, you can reap the full benefits of this breakthrough technology and experience games that look better than anything you've ever played before.

The ASUS GeForce RTX range of NVIDIA graphics cards is your gateway into the world of RTX, and all the ways it can enhance your gaming experience. Games like Control, Cyberpunk 2077, Battlefield V, and even Minecraft look incredible with a GeForce RTX card – better than they've ever looked before. With the Xbox Series X and PlayStation 5 leaning into ray tracing, you'll want to make sure that your PC can keep up with – or even outperform – the next several years of huge games.

The TUF GAMING cooler has been redesigned completely from the ground up, preparing a comfortable working environment for the GPU to work to its fullest without sweating. From the bottom up there is the super finely polished MAXCONTACT base that has been linked to a massive six heatpipes to the extended 2.7 slot height heatsink for fast heat extraction off the GPU. Its partnering GDDR6X graphical memory is also well looked after by a set of dedicated thermal modules at both the front and the back of the card.

The new RTX 3080 cements ray-tracing as a gaming necessity.

Heat then dissipates into the air with the concentrated airflow from three specially oriented Axial fans, directing cool airflow to every corner of the card top of bottom.

They've even got a new logo to show off how serious a next step this is – this is the biggest leap in technology ever for an NVIDIA card series.

REAL PERFORMANCE GAINS: AT LAST

The ASUS TUF Gaming GeForce RTX 3080 is something truly special, and a card that will suit most modern builds. It makes use of NVIDIA Ampere Streaming Multiprocessor technology to provide an extremely fast GPU experience, one with double the throughput of the previous generation of cards. The RT cores in this card are second generation, capable of pushing ray tracing and visual performance to new levels – meaning that not only will the games of today look better than ever, but you'll be able to run the games of tomorrow with the settings cranked up. This GPU supports resolutions of up to 8K, and the DLSS AI rendering engine powered by the third generation Tensor cores, boosting

frame rate without compromising image quality. You can also make use of GPU Tweak II for improved performance tweaking, and to closely monitor your system.

With RTX enabled, games can do things they couldn't before. Looking at Cyberpunk 2077 as an example, ray tracing will lead to sharp, accurate reflections in surfaces, incredible diffuse illumination lighting, and superior shadows thanks to ambient occlusion. If you like roleplaying games, you like to feel like the places you're in are real – and the GeForce RTX 3080 will really take you to Night City. The card features 10GB of GDDR6X video memory, with memory speeds of up to 19.5 Gbps – an incredible performance. It has two HDMI 2.1 output ports, with three DisplayPort 1.4a ports and HDCP support, and even supports up to four displays simultaneously. Just remember to feed it right, and it will reward you greatly. A quality 750W single rail PSU such as the STRIX 750G will have you covered all the way up to an overclocked i7 or R7. Anything above, you may then want to consider moving up to the STRIX 850G or THOR 850P. This is an incredible card, one that you can push hard and rely on for years to come.

GOD-TIER POWER

While the TUF RTX 3080 is a tremendous card, if you're building a very serious PC, you might want the top of the line. The ROG STRIX RTX3090 is even more powerful, with a few extra build features that might suit your needs. It sports an astonishing 24GB GDDR6X video memory, so it can run games at 60fps at 8K if you've got the set-up for it. It has an expanded slot design – while the TUF RTX3080 has a 2.7-slot footprint, the STRIX RTX3090 increases it to 2.9. This expanded size allows for an increased thermal headroom, if you can accommodate it in your case, for the best possible cooling. It also contains premium Super Alloy Power II components, such as capacitors, chokes, and MOSFETs – an improvement even on the 3080's incredible military-grade components. The 3090 features two PWM FanConnect headers at the back for DIY possibilities, the chassis fans to ramp up and down with the change of GPU temperature, where the airflow is needed the most. This one's for anyone looking to build an absolute beast of a PC.

For the ultimate in 8K gaming, the STRIX RTX3090 is the go-to choice.

PICTURE PERFECT

The world's fastest eSport gaming monitor.

To get the full benefit of what your new card is pumping out, you'll need a monitor that can capture every detail with pixel-perfect precision – and one that will give you a leg-up in your games, because it's been built with high-level professional play in mind. The ASUS ROG Swift PG259QN is perfect if you're looking for a new screen – it's designed for esports level play, so it's both gorgeous and responsive. It can manage an unbeatable 360hz refresh rate, and a peak brightness of over 500 nits for incredible fidelity and astonishing colour. It's a G-Sync monitor with adaptive sync support and features an IPS panel so that you can ensure your colours are accurate from all viewing angles.

It's a monitor that will show off just how incredible your PC's new RTX card is.

Ray tracing isn't just the future of game graphics – even older games like Quake II can look better than ever before with an ASUS GeForce RTX card and ray tracing enabled. The rendering technique is fast becoming an industry standard, and cards like the ASUS TUF Gaming GeForce RTX 3080 can ensure that you stay ahead of the next several years of technological advancement. These are the best, most exciting video cards on the market right now, and all most visually impressive games are going to be built with them in mind going forward. ASUS' GeForce RTX range of Nvidia cards will blow you away – games have never looked better.

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Hagionaut

GAMING'S LINEAGES EXPLORED

Schafer was influenced by Mad Max and Kurosawa films.

FULL THROTTLE

LucasArts' biker adventure still kicks ass. *By Andy Kelly*

To me *Full Throttle* isn't so much a point-and-click adventure as a point-and-*kick* adventure. While many adventure game protagonists are usually bumbling, unlikely heroes who make up for their physical shortcomings by relying on their wits to solve problems in their world, square-jawed biker Ben is more comfortable using his fists and feet. More than one puzzle in the game is solved by kicking something, and this refreshingly no-nonsense approach is what sets *Full Throttle* apart from other classic LucasArts adventures. I mean, why solve a series of increasingly absurd puzzles to unlock a door when you can just boot it off its hinges?

Released in 1995, *Full Throttle* was written and designed by Tim Schafer, whose name has become synonymous with LucasArts adventure games, from *Monkey Island* to *Grim Fandango*. Schafer was influenced by Mad Max and Kurosawa films; particularly the idea of a stoic, tough guy hero who's never looking for trouble, but finds it anyway. Visually, lead artist Peter Chan took inspiration from Mike Mignola's Hellboy comics, which is evident in his use of heavy shadows and silhouettes. LucasArts greenlit *Full Throttle* on Schafer's assurance that it would be a commercial hit, and he was right. LucasArts adventures usually sold about 100,000 copies, but a million people bought *Full Throttle*.

Ben is on the run for a murder he didn't commit, which is bad, but not as bad as the fact that Corley Motors – the last motorcycle manufacturer in the country – is ceasing production of its legendary bikes to mass produce minivans. And so our stubbly, leather-clad anti-hero embarks on a quest to clear his name and, more importantly, save his way of life from being destroyed by soulless corporate suits. *Full Throttle* is a game about freedom and authenticity, leaning into the romantic idea of an outlaw biker on the road, rather than the grim reality you might have read about in Hunter S Thompson's Hell's Angels. It's bikers as pirates, as wandering samurai, not the shady criminals that you'd usually see.

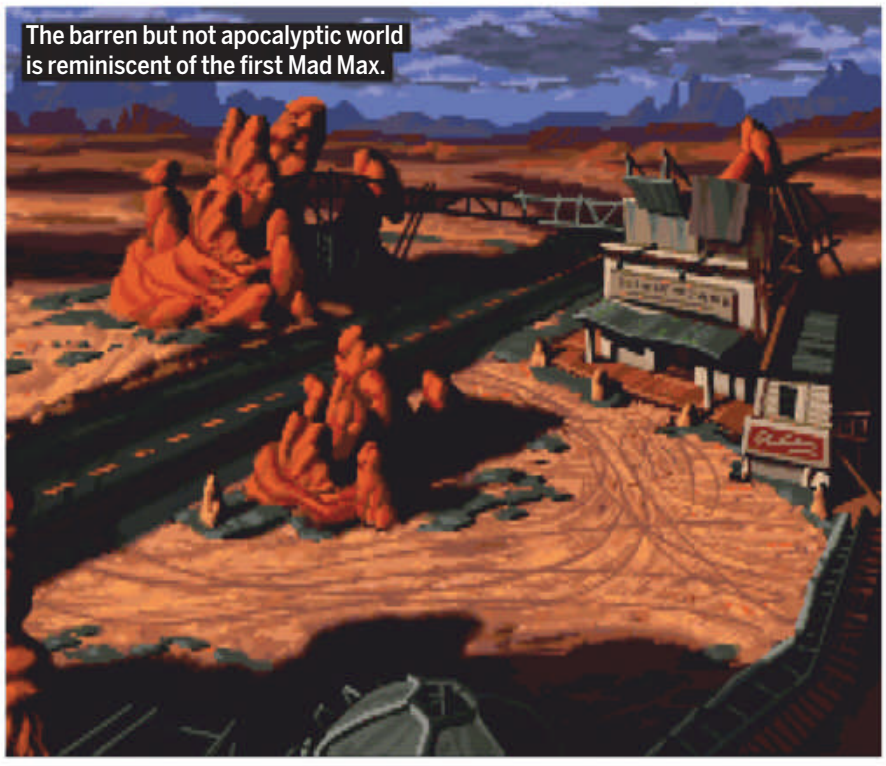
HOG WILD

The Mad Max influence also extends to the setting. This is not a post-apocalyptic world, but it has the feel of one, with miles of barren desert highway, gangs hijacking trucks, and

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASED 1995	**DEVELOPER** LucasArts
PUBLISHER In-house	**LINK** fullthrottle.doublefine.com

The remaster's art is nice, but it's hard to beat the original pixels.



The barren but not apocalyptic world is reminiscent of the first Mad Max.

You could crack walnuts on that chin.

mohawked bikers picking fights with each other just for the fun of it. *Full Throttle*'s desolate slice of the American West is a bleak, lawless, forgotten place, which makes it perfect for a nihilistic biker like Ben. The game also features some futuristic elements, including hover-cars, which adds a unique flavour to its aesthetic – but without it drifting into sci-fi territory. Artistically, this is one of LucasArts' most interesting games, and it remains a real treat to look at, even on a big, modern monitor.

But it wouldn't be anything without its cast. Tim Schafer is known for writing memorable characters, and *Full Throttle* is full of them. Ben is a great hero because he's a gravel-voiced hardass, but he also has a heart. The late Roy Conrad plays him perfectly, delivering his lines with a knowing, bone-dry humour. The supporting cast is great too, including villainous corporate stooge Ripburger, melancholy mechanic Mo, and treacherous trucker Emmet. This was one of the first videogames to cast mostly professional actors registered with the Screen Actors Guild, which is certainly reflected in the high quality of its voice acting.

And you can't reminisce about *Full Throttle* without mentioning the music. The soundtrack is a huge part of its personality and enduring legacy, whether it's the atmospheric original score by longtime Tim Schafer collaborator Peter McConnell, or the fuzzy dive bar rock supplied by biker band The Gone Jackals. The use of their song Legacy in the opening titles is still one of the best uses of licensed music in a videogame, perfectly setting the tone for the adventure to come. Ben roaring along the highway to that guitar riff is about as good as it gets.

FULL ON

Compared to previous LucasArts adventures, *Full Throttle* is more streamlined and cinematic. Much of its three to five hour running time is made up of beautifully animated cutscenes, and the 'verb buffet' interface popularised by *Monkey Island* is replaced with a flaming skull that offers only a handful of ways to interact with the world – including Ben's favourites, the gloved fist and the leather boot. The idea behind

PAINT JOB

Original vs remastered visuals

1 Double Fine and Shiny Shoe, who were contracted to help out with the remaster, repainted over 15,000 frames of animation.

2 Schafer says *Full Throttle* was much harder to remaster than *Day of the Tentacle*, which only had three fullscreen shots.

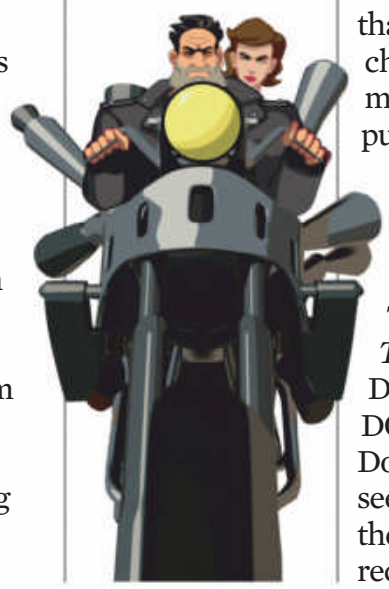
3 The remastered visuals stay true to the original aesthetic, but I prefer the nostalgia hit of the old pixel art.

At the time, motorcycle chainsaw fights were relatively rare in the point-and-click genre.

ITS PUZZLES FEEL LIKE A NATURAL FIT FOR A GAME ABOUT BADASS BIKERS.

this, according to Schafer, was that constantly looking up and down to interact with stuff was distracting. The new interface also gave the artists more space to play with, with evocative backgrounds that cover the entire screen, rather than being obscured by the UI.

Full Throttle is also lighter on puzzles than most LucasArts adventures – and the puzzles it has are relatively straightforward, at least compared to the likes of *Day of the Tentacle*. What it's good at is making its puzzles feel like a natural fit for a game about badass bikers, hiding them in plain sight. A few hours into the game, Ben finds himself on a notorious desert back-road where riders from rival gangs meet up to fight. You have to figure out which weapons work against which bikers, clicking the mouse to furiously swing your chainsaw, plank of wood, or whatever you happen to be wielding. It has the feel of an action minigame, but it's really just an elaborately presented puzzle.



A side effect of this streamlined design is that *Full Throttle* is pretty short – as I say, it takes about three to five hours to finish. Over the years this has been cited by many as its biggest weakness, but I actually think it's a perfect length. Compared to the languid pace of most point-and-click adventures, this is a breakneck sprint through a series of thrilling set-pieces, with only short moments of downtime between them. And, really, that's what a game about this kind of character should be like. If Ben spent more time wandering around solving puzzles than tearing around on his hog, he wouldn't be much of a biker, would he?

REMASTER CLASS

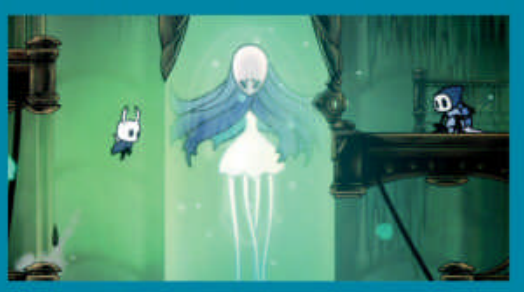
There are a few ways to play *Full Throttle*. You can get the original DOS version, or use an emulator like DOSBox. But for the best experience, Double Fine's 2017 remaster is worth seeking out. You can play this with the original visuals, which I recommend, because as much effort clearly went into the remastered graphics, the original pixel art just looks better. But the best thing about this version is the uncompressed audio, taken from the original DAT recordings. As a fan who's played this game maybe 50 times over the years, it's a strange sensation hearing that classic dialogue – and that killer soundtrack – without a layer of compression fuzz. The remaster also comes with a load of concept art and a fun, insightful commentary track led by Tim Schafer.

Full Throttle endures because of its story, characters, and setting, not its puzzles. It's rarely held up as an example of great point-and-click adventure design, but in every other respect it's one of the finest – and most original – games LucasArts ever released. It also cemented Tim Schafer as someone with a knack for creating worlds that people love existing in, and characters they love hanging out with. LucasArts once threatened to release a third-person 3D sequel called *Hell on Wheels*, without the involvement of Schafer, but it was cancelled – and I'm glad. *Full Throttle* is a one-off, and its legacy should be left unspoiled. ■

QUIRRELL FROM HOLLOW KNIGHT

The whimsical bug is a fellow traveller of Hallownest's forgotten roads. *By Rachel Watts*

LEFT: The perfect spot for a snooze



The labyrinth that lies beneath the small bug town of Dirtmouth is a dangerous place. Exploring the ruins of *Hollow Knight*'s vast kingdom is an isolating experience, and running into the creatures living in these wastelands will almost always end in confrontation.

Although the scale of these sprawling caverns is unnerving, exploration and discovery are the two main pillars of *Hollow Knight*. You have to embrace the feeling of getting a little lost and letting curiosity lead the way – even if it gets the better of you. Thankfully, you're not alone in this pursuit. Throughout your journey you bump into another traveller on their own quest – Quirrel.

He embodies the game's sense of discovery wholeheartedly. His curiosity for the mysteries of Hallownest pulls him deeper into the kingdom for reasons he cannot explain. He's a bit of a mysterious character, describing himself as more of an observer than a warrior, although he does carry a nail around for safety. Like many other characters in the undergrowth, he's lost his memory and is hoping to recover it by wandering the wastes of Hallownest. Although his fate is a bit uncertain, Quirrel is an upbeat bug and always fascinated by the world around him. He's also the closest thing you have to a friend down in the dark pits of Hallownest.

You meet Quirrel a few times over the course of the game, usually finding him in the rare peaceful pockets of the underground. Running into him normally means a moment of rest, and the game often invites you to share it with him, sitting next to him on a bench or quietly gazing at whatever he's looking at. If you strike up a conversation, he's always open about what he's musing over.

Being a fellow explorer, Quirrel has a genuine interest in Hallownest and wants to understand its myths and history, and Team Cherry's gorgeously gloomy subterranean world is stuffed to the brim with lore. The detail that has gone into building the fallen bug civilization is comprehensive, but also completely sealed away within the broken memories and hazy dreams of the characters. With *Hollow Knight*'s story being notoriously difficult to piece together, it's nice sharing this path with a fellow traveller. His musings are often posed as questions, like whether something can be opened, or questioning the importance of a place. When he asks these questions, I find myself wanting to know the answers. The most poignant example of this is when you meet him in the City of Tears.

QUIRREL IS AN UPBEAT BUG AND ALWAYS FASCINATED BY THE WORLD AROUND HIM.

WANDER-FUL

This area is a beautiful metropolis deep within Hallownest, where it always rains. Its lore describes it as once the beating heart of the kingdom, but now its mechanical elevators, endless libraries, and intricate tram systems lie abandoned. You find Quirrel sitting on a bench looking out a window over the city, and you can take a seat next to him. It's one of the most serene moments of the game as the music quietens down to highlight the light pitter-patter of the rain.

Joining him on the bench, he muses about the endless rain that encompasses the city, and wonders where the water comes from – since Hallownest is so deep underground. It's an interesting point, I'd been running around the City of Tears for a while and just accepted the rain as a weird anomaly, but maybe there was a reason. "Before I leave this Kingdom, I'd like to see where all that water comes from," he says. "What a sight it must be!"

Quirrel's observations inspire you to act, and that is what makes him the perfect companion. Many wanderers are looking for something – be it freedom, peace, to lose themselves, or to find something. For Quirrel and the player, our search for answers is what unites us.

Untangling the web of locations and lore in *Hollow Knight* is no easy task, but Quirrel is a character who inspires you to look deeper. Crossing paths with him was always a welcome encounter, his curiosity and wisdom always inspiring me to push on. Without him, I would never have found some of Hallownest's deeper secrets, like the real source of that endless rain. He really captures the whimsical nature of a true wanderer – one pursues their curiousity, but also nurtures it in others. ■

A BUG'S LIFE *Hallownest's other wandering characters*

CORNIFER
A friendly cartographer who wants to map all of Hallownest.

HORNET
A protector of the ruins, and star of the upcoming sequel.

CLOTH
She has a big heart, but her courage could do with some work.

ZOTE THE MIGHTY
The 'Knight of the People.' (A title he gave himself.)

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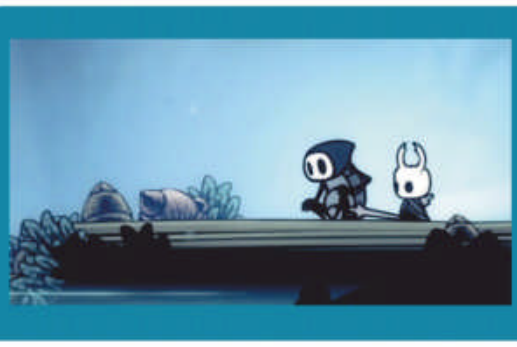

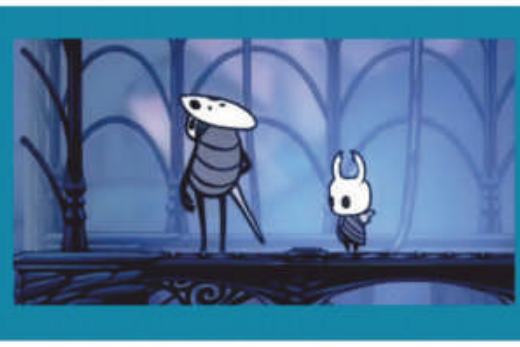

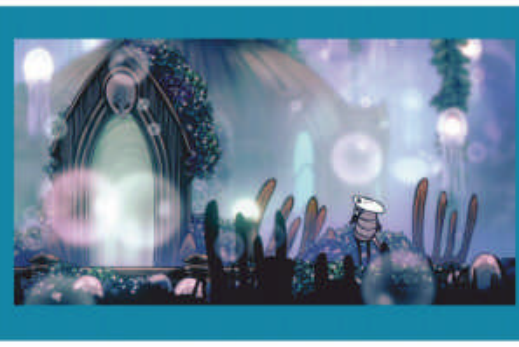

RIGHT: So, what are you thinking about?

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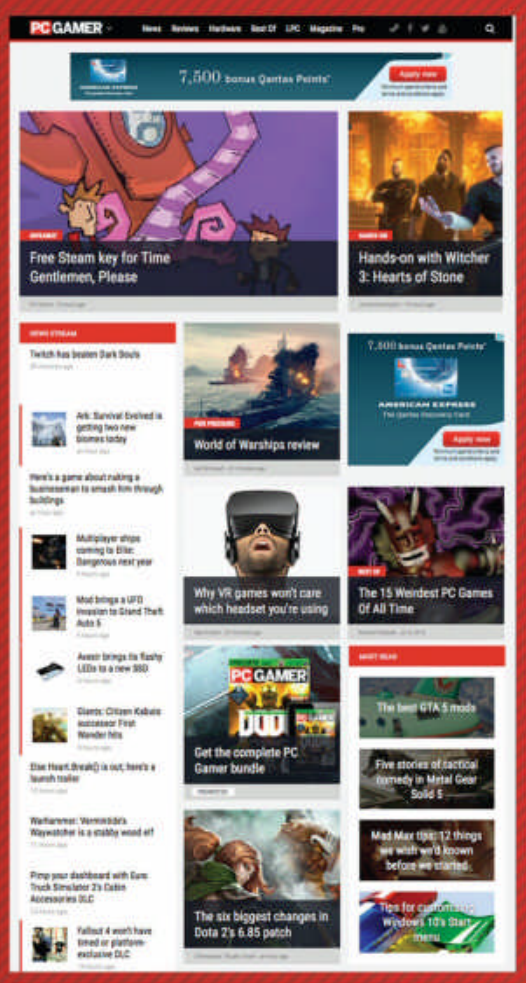
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